**Going to the Dogs**

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# Going to the Dogs

by pinkskyline

Summary

Will Graham is a dog specialist. He's been creating amazing kennels for the landed and wealthy in Victorian England for some time, but now he's attracted the attention of a certain Lithuanian nobleman who might need some renovations to the kennels in his family home. Hannibal has plans for his new employee; plans Will will have to adapt to to survive.

Notes

Imagine my surprise when I opened up my drive and realized I'd started a Victorian AU in this fandom?? I'm three chapters in and surprisingly into it. If you happen to be someone who followed me because of one of my other projects which I am neglecting in favor of this one, my apologies. But--Victorian England AU! Enjoy, if that happens to be your thing.

# Chapter 1

Count Hannibal Lecter was a foreigner whose extended family had bought land in England a generation ago. Hannibal himself had emigrated several years ago after spending his childhood in his homeland of Lithuania, his adolescence in a French boarding school, and his young adulthood in Italy. Somehow, Hannibal had managed to gain entry to one of the most exclusive clubs in London, though he occasionally wished the exclusive club had actually denied him entry.

The club was housed in a beautiful, historic building with sumptuous oak paneling and the best wine and Scotch list in town, plus an adequate kitchen, but the other patrons were mind-numbing.

Presently he was sitting with Sir Frederick Chilton, Dr. Donald Sutcliffe, and Lord Abel Gideon. Lord Gideon was the highest ranking of the English nobility at the table, but somehow they all deferred to Hannibal, even though there were rumors that his family had been chased out of Lithuania in some vaguely suspicious way.

It was a tragedy that had made Hannibal leave Lithuania as a boy, not a scandal. Although perhaps his uncle had left due to scandal; he'd never been able to get a straight answer from him as to why he'd left, and now he was dead. His wife, Hannibal's aunt, had gone back to Japan, leaving her handmaiden to "look after" Hannibal–which tickled his fancy a little, because he was older than she was. Nevertheless she was very capable, and he'd grown to depend on her.

She wasn't much for socializing, however, preferring to work as a mostly silent gamekeeper in his country house.

His country house was a grand affair that was the current subject of the conversation, as it was his turn to host the hunting party the following year, and the Englishmen were concerned that his stable would not be adequate to their needs, and as there were eleven months until their planned visit, there was plenty of time for improvements.

"I have enough dogs, trust me," Hannibal said.

Gideon took a sip of Scotch. "You have some dogs, but you don't have the amazing kennel that Sir Francis Dolarhyde has."

"If you'd prefer to accept an invitation from Sir Francis, by all means. I would not be offended," Hannibal said.

They all hurried to deny the desire to change their invitation, but Gideon wouldn't leave the subject of the dogs behind. "Sir Francis has the most amazing kennels. I know your objections to having a great crowd of hounds. They often become sick because of the close quarters and the damp, and a smaller group of hounds are easier to clean up after. But the man Sir Francis had design his kennel is a marvel."

Hannibal resigned himself to continuing the topic. “Oh? A family friend, is he?”

Sir Chilton smiled. “This is no younger scion of a wealthy family. A self-made man. And they say he has a unique mind. More animal than man. They say he can read a man’s character in his gait or his face, the same way a beast can. You know, how dogs are wary of men of low character.”

Hannibal tried not to let his confusion show. He’d never heard that dogs were good judges of character. In fact, he’d once killed a man and fed part of his face to the man’s own beloved dog. Every time he’d seen the mutt since he’d wagged his tail and licked his face, and never seemed to resent the fact that Hannibal had murdered his master. But the idea that a wild man was fleecing the wealthy to build them dog houses had some appeal.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. That does pique my interest, especially from the perspective of an amateur alienist, but not enough for me to force my company on a man I’ve never been introduced to. I’ve heard of Sir Francis but we’re not from the same social circles.”

“We know him and we’re in your social circle. We think you’d get along with him. In fact, it’s at his urging that we’ve brought him up at all. He’s willing to pull out all the stops to make your acquaintance. He even said that if you agreed to visit, he’d get a renowned spiritualist to come, since your interest in spirits is well known,” Chilton said.

Hannibal was not unfamiliar with people courting his company, but he had no idea what interest this Dolarhyde might have in him. The man was a notorious recluse–apparently he had a minor deformity he was sensitive about. Hannibal was normally socially deft, but he was a bit at the end of his rope with all the maneuvering the others were doing. “Why does he want to see me?” he asked outright. “What on earth have you fellows told him about me?”

“He won’t say,” Donald said, “But I think he wants an alienist.”

“Yes, he said he’s read some of your papers and he has questions for you. I suspect they’re not about your writing, however, but of you practicing your theories on him,” Chilton said.

“You dabble in alienism as much as I do. Why not ask you?” asked Hannibal.

Chilton rolled his eyes. “What do you think, Hannibal? It’s the hypnotism. The imaginations of the ignorant have been captured by the idea of hypnotism. I still don’t really believe you can effectively treat patients with it. It’s a party trick, nothing more.”

It was an old argument between the two, even though the idea of hypnotism was a relatively new one. Hannibal refused to rise to the bait. “When is this country party I’ve apparently been invited to?” Hannibal asked.

“A fortnight. You’ll have a good time, I promise. He’s very rich, and he has a good kitchen. Very fresh meat,” Donald said.

Hannibal usually refused meat when he was visiting. He was very careful about what he put in his body, and some kitchens in private houses were simply disastrous. But if he was

allowed to tour the dog kennels, perhaps he could tour the other farm facilities, and he would be less reluctant.

So that was how Hannibal found himself in his best carriage on the way to Sir Francis Dolarhyde's country manor two weeks later. His companions had begged to either accompany him or have him share their ride, but he refused, wanting a means to escape independently should the party not be as he had been led to expect it to be.

The house was a large, grim place made of dark gray stone. Its grounds had definitely never seen the likes of Capability Brown or any other landscape artist–there was something dark and lifeless about the gardens, which anyone with sense would have trimmed for light, at the very least. As the carriage got closer, Hannibal could see the lack of light had covered parts of the building in a thick layer of mold. Picturesque.

The woman who greeted Hannibal at the door was, surprisingly, black, and very beautiful.

"Hello there," Hannibal called to her as he stepped out of the carriage.

"You must be Count Lecter," she said in a cultured voice. "You're the last of the guests to arrive. We've been expecting you."

"I take it you're Lady Dolarhyde. But I was not informed that Sir Francis was married."

She smiled slightly. "Francis' friends sometimes have trouble describing me to others. If they don't get stuck on the fact that I'm black, they get awkward about the fact that I'm blind. If it's not that, they might get a kick out of embarrassing you by letting you assume I'm the housekeeper rather than Sir Francis' wife."

Hannibal had already assumed it was the last one. "Or perhaps they're unsure how to describe another man's wife without mentioning that she's beautiful," Hannibal said.

She laughed. "Oh god. Not a gallant one. I'll forgive you, I guess, for being the reason we had to invite a spiritualist into my home. I had my doubts. Come along. The servants will be along to see to your horses and take the bags inside."

The lady of the house led him to a raucous drawing room where the men who had persuaded him to come were drinking and laughing among several other men and women Hannibal didn't know.

Lady Dolarhyde announced him and then allowed someone else to take over introductions. Although she could probably do introductions perfectly fine, she probably didn't want to make things awkward for anyone. Chilton took over the task and introduced everyone in the room with oily efficacy. The master of the house, Sir Francis, was a very tall and handsome man who had a slight hair lip. Hannibal knew better than to wonder at the fact that he seemed so self conscious about his slight deformity. There were several other visitors of no consequence, and then he was introduced to the famous spiritualist Fredrika Lounds. She was a beautiful woman with red hair and a confident manner. Hannibal had wanted to meet her for quite some time.

Donald Sutcliffe wandered over, evidently having had one too many cocktails. “So, did you assume the lady of the house was the housekeeper?”

Lady Dolarhyde appeared at Donald’s shoulder. “He didn’t. He assumed I was the Lady of the house and gracefully tried to cover for his friend’s rudeness. It’s nice, for once, to have a civilized guest.”

Donald’s look of embarrassment almost made Hannibal reconsider killing Donald. It seemed Lady Dolarhyde had spirit and could more than stand up for herself.

“I hope that you’ve invited some close friends of your own to drown out the rudeness of your husband's associates,” Hannibal said.

Lady Dolarhyde smiled. “I had that same thought. My friend Alana Bloom, the local vicar’s daughter, is coming for dinner tonight. Her pleasant company, and yours, will see me through.”

Soon enough the party made it out to the garden, where cocktails and appetizers had been laid out. Hannibal made the kind of banal conversation he always made, and he flattered himself that he brought some life to the party. Eventually, he managed to maneuver his way over to where the medium was standing.

“Miss Lounds,” he said, as he approached her.

“Call me Freddie,” she said, her voice ingratiating.

Hannibal wasn’t keen to engage in intimacies that hadn’t been earned, especially with someone from a different social strata. “I’m Count Lecter,” he said. “It’s very nice to meet you. I wonder if you could give me an idea of your methods.”

“My usual method is to have a gathering of open minds in the hour approaching midnight. The collective energy of the group can encourage the spirits to come to me. And I can sometimes pass along a message to some of those people who are open to it.”

Hannibal recognized the evasion. If he didn’t get the message he wanted from his sister, she’d say he wasn’t open to it, or wasn’t ready to hear it yet. She had many of the behaviors of a con artist, and yet he’d found glimmers of talent in people who clearly made their living conning people before. He excused himself, deciding to reserve judgment until he saw her in action.

Hannibal walked over to the refreshment table to take a glass of champagne. He saw a man so beautiful he belonged in a Botticelli standing beside Lady Dolarhyde. He couldn’t help but approach the two of them.

When he walked over, the beautiful man’s smile dimmed and he seemed to shrink. For once, Hannibal was at a loss as to how to open the conversation.

Thankfully, the beautiful man did that for him.

“Freddie Lounds isn’t going to be able to give you what you want. I hope you’re not counting on her powers to be real.”

“I’m interested in spiritualism, but it doesn’t necessarily follow that I believe in it without reservation,” Hannibal said.

“That’s comforting,” he said.

“What do you know about her?” Hannibal asked.

“He seems rude, Hannibal, but his powers of perception are legendary. I should have had me come with him to visit her before we offered to hire her for the party,” Lady Dolarhyde said.

“She’s an opportunist,” the man said. “Some spiritualists at least offer a service. They counsel and comfort. She talks to everyone in the room about all the tragedies in everyone else’s life. And that’s just to fill in the blanks she couldn’t find out from reading the newspapers. You know she requested a guest list in advance? Why would she need that if she wasn’t using it to do research on anyone you all might have lost? She might not be able to find out your personal tragedy because you’re foreign, but depending on how open you are with your friends–”

“No, they have no idea why I’m interested in spiritualism,” Hannibal said.

“A tragedy from childhood, then?” Will said, then held up a hand. “Sorry. That wasn’t a question. I’m not trying to pry. Sometimes I see more than I should, and then I just say it.”

“No, I’m intrigued. Tell me more about my childhood,” Hannibal said. And the strange thing was, that he really wanted to know. Normally he would have said the same thing and waited for the scruffy but beautiful boy to hang himself, but this time, he didn’t care what he said so long as he could have an excuse to prolong the conversation.

Lady Dolarhyde placed a hand on the beautiful man’s arm. “I know enough about your powers of perception to excuse myself from this conversation in the interest of preserving Count Lecter's privacy.” She walked off.

“She’s very capable, isn’t she?” Hannibal observed.

“She’s great. She and her husband are far above average for the useless classes,” Will said.

Hannibal laughed despite himself. “I suppose I must plead guilty to belonging to that group.”

“I’m so sorry. You just seemed kind of sensible. I suppose you’re a lord or something like everyone else here?”

“A count, actually. But as you observed, as a foreigner, it hardly matters in the halls of power in this country,” Hannibal said.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know why Lady Dolarhyde makes me come to these things. I’m awkward as hell. Sorry. I know saying I’m awkward makes me even more awkward.”

“You’re charming,” Hannibal said, despite himself.

The other man crossed his arms. “Do you really want me to find out your childhood trauma?”

“As long as you promise not to disclose it to anyone.”

“Of course.” His eyes suddenly grew unfocused, then he closed them, and then he opened them and looked in Hannibal’s eyes. “You lost someone as a child. Not your parents, although they’re dead, too. No. Someone you felt responsible for. A sister. She’s the reason you wanted to talk to Lounds. The reason you feel separate from people most of the time.”

Hannibal just stared at him.

“See? People never like it when I actually do the thing. Or did I get it wrong?” the boy asks, sounding hopeful.

“No, you didn’t get it wrong,” Hannibal said. “How did you do that?”

A shifty young man approached the two of them. “Will? I really. I need to talk to you.”

“Oh, Peter. Thank god,” the beautiful boy, Will apparently, said. He excused himself and left.

“What a remarkable creature,” Hannibal said to Sir Dolarhyde as he walked up.

“Oh, you’ve met Will. He’s my kennel master.”

“I heard something about him being able to read someone’s character on their face, but I confess, I had no idea it would be so…”

“I know. Talking to him is rather remarkable. And he can do pretty much the same thing with dogs. I think he prefers them. Some men take issue with the way he reads them. And the way he has very little respect for one’s station.”

“I noticed that,” Hannibal said. “But it makes sense, I think. Where there is real superiority of mind, it must be hard to bow and scrape. Especially when he can see through all of our classes' ridiculous pretenses.”

“The fellows implied you might want to hire Will to set up your kennels. I did wonder if he’d be able to be social enough to make another commission work. Most people usually have to see the kennels before they hire him, but you seem to see his brilliance already.”

Hannibal had very little interest in keeping an expensive kennel, but he imagined that he would be able to install that dear boy in his household and have many more conversations with him if he did commission a new kennel. “I would feel terrible taking him away from you.”

“He’s training a local village boy to do the work. Peter is a little different, but Will has ensured he can still be useful. I would be very happy to recommend Will and set him on the path to success.”

“Then perhaps I will see about engaging his services, provided, of course, that the kennels meet my requirements.”

Dolarhyde smiled, then covered his mouth almost apologetically. “They will. We can tour the place tomorrow. I’ll make sure Will will be there to explain everything.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Hannibal said. He took a sip of champagne. It was truly a shame that Miss Lounds appeared to be a fraud and a harridan, but Will was extremely promising. The promise of seeing more of the young man would keep the weekend from being a total failure.

# Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> Will is a bit rougher around the edges in this story than he is in the show. Just thought it made sense because he's supposed to be a relatively uneducated commoner. Hope he doesn't seem actually out of character.

The dinner table was expansive and, though Will Graham was surprisingly present at the dinner table, he was nowhere near Hannibal. He also seemed quite taken with his dinner companion, who Hannibal knew to be Miss Alana Bloom, the daughter of the local vicar.

Hannibal tried not to be jealous. After all, although Will was mixing with society, he was unlikely to be accepted enough to marry even a modest vicar's daughter, so any connection they had would have to be temporary. It irked Hannibal a bit that Will would definitely not be saying something like "thank god" when the table turned and he was called to speak to his other dinner companion, however.

Dinner was tolerable, although Hannibal couldn't bring himself to touch the meat. Sometimes he could persuade himself, but not tonight.

After dinner, the men went into an antechamber to smoke and drink whiskey.

Will wasn't smoking, but he had a liberal drink in his hand. Hannibal approached him. "Hello again," he said.

Will grimaced. "Hello," he said.

Hannibal would have taken offense at that grimace from anyone else. When that expression came from Will, it made Hannibal want to win him over. He sat down.

Will appeared to steel himself for the conversation and ventured, "I hear you are interested in my methods of raising dogs."

Hannibal shrugged. "I'm interested to hear how you would arrange your ideal kennel, if you had the resources and a large house. How would you do things differently than you would for a client?"

Will's face reddened slightly. "I'd just take my dogs into my house. That's what I do with my dogs already."

"Surely you couldn't have fifty dogs in a house, no matter how big it was," Hannibal said.

Will shrugged. “I have seven dogs and I keep them with me in the guest cottage. Shit. You’re probably not going to hire me to come mess up your house if I admit to that, are you?”

“I would have to rethink accommodations a little. But my household is unconventional in many ways, and if you wanted to bring seven dogs into the main house, I would be happy to accommodate you,” Hannibal said.

Will looked somewhat alarmed by this, and Hannibal decided he would have to dial down his interest significantly. He didn’t want to scare him off. But Will only said, “What’s unconventional about your household?”

Hannibal congratulated himself on finally saying something to engage Will. “If we reach an accord and you come stay with me, you’ll find out.”

Hannibal drifted away, hoping to capitalize on the idea that his absence might make Will’s heart grow fonder. When he looked for Will again after the men rejoined the women, he found Will had retired for the night. He turned his attention to Alana Bloom, and then, after an adequate amount of pleasantries, he turned the conversation to Will Graham.

“You seem rather friendly with Will Graham,” he said. “Can you tell me about him?”

“He’s an oddity. A hundred years ago he would have been burned for witchcraft,” Alana said.

“And yet an innocent vicar’s daughter is happy to spend time with him?”

“I never said he was magic or evil. Will is a good man who can be misunderstood.”

“How does he do what he does?”

Alana smiled. “Don’t you think it would be better to ask him?”

“When one forms new acquaintanceships, it is not considered rude to learn what one can about them from their long standing friends. If you’d rather not discuss him, we can change the subject.”

“No, it’s not that I’m uncomfortable talking about Will. It’s that I worry about him. He can be…strangely vulnerable. The most I’ll say about what he does is that it leaves him open. He can be susceptible to people’s moods, thoughts, feelings, even sometimes their personalities. He can be influenced. And so I don’t like the idea of him being exposed to a lot of strangers.”

“You speak about him as though you have a medical education.”

Alana smiled again, this time more brightly. “Yes. Not a formal one. My father cannot spare the money to send me to school when he’s convinced I’ll just marry and waste all the training, but I do have a good friend in medical school who sends me textbooks, and though I flatter myself, I think my knowledge is equal to that of many a country doctor. Some of the locals ask me to doctor them here and there.”

“Many of the most educated people I know are self-educated. It’s commendable for you to spend your time in such a fashion when it would be easier to pursue more traditional feminine pastimes.”

Alana laughed loudly at this. “Maybe for some women feminine pursuits are easy. Reading old medical textbooks is far easier for me than learning piano or painting ceramics and reading French.”

Hannibal allowed himself a close-mouthed smile. “Ironically, I’m well-versed in such traditionally feminine pursuits. But I also have a copy of Gray’s Anatomy that I read from time to time, though I’m more interested in the new field of alienism these days. I didn’t mean to imply that there was anything wrong with enjoying a variety of pastimes, whether traditionalists view them or masculine or feminine.”

“That’s refreshingly open-minded,” Alana said. “I would love your recommendation of some texts on alienism. I confess my father thinks it’s an improper field of study for a woman, but I find it fascinating.”

The conversation ended when it was announced that it was time to play cards. Hannibal had no interest in such things, and found Lady Dolarhyde, who claimed to the room at large that her blindness made it impossible for her to play. She confessed to Hannibal privately that Braille playing cards had allowed her to learn card games, but she didn’t enjoy playing them in large parties. He conversed with her until it was time for them all to retire to bed.

The next morning, after a breakfast buffet, it was finally time for Hannibal to tour the kennels.

He walked down with Francis, who took the opportunity to confide in him the reason why he wanted to make Hannibal’s acquaintance in the first place.

“I wanted to try hypnosis. My wife…she’s the best thing that ever happened to me. I met her when I was young, and she–her influence–healed something in me. Or at least, I thought it did. But something has awakened. I don’t know what it is. I need you to kill it. Get it out of me.”

“Sometimes the best thing one can do with an unwanted impulse is to give into it.”

Francis looked at him solemnly. “I’m not sure you’re used to dealing with impulses like mine. I’m not talking about a desire to break my marriage vows. I’m talking about darker things. Things a man like you would never encourage me to do.”

You’d be surprised, Hannibal almost said. “I think if I were to agree to help you, I wouldn’t be able to do it from here. At my home I would have my equipment, my assistant and my notebooks. It would be more likely to succeed if you were to join me there.”

“Would you be able to accommodate both myself and my wife?”

“Of course. I would be happy to host you, and any servants you require.”

Francis nodded gratefully, and no more was said about that.

Finally, they arrived in the kennels. The first thing Hannibal noticed was the smell. He couldn't smell animal urine or feces. "Is this building occupied by actual dogs?" he asked.

He heard footsteps, and saw Will approaching them. "Of course there's dogs here. Where do you think I would have put them?" he said irritably.

"Forgive me, I have an extremely sensitive nose. And I can't smell animal waste."

"You shouldn't smell animal waste. Why would you want a kennel that smelled of piss and shit?" Will asked.

"I don't. That's why I've always kept my number of dogs small," Hannibal said.

"There's a theory that if dogs are too domesticated, they lose the desire to hunt. There's great pageantry around everyone gathering around to watch the mob of dogs rip apart a carcass for their lunch. People want them wild. But animals can be trained to be savage without abusing or neglecting their care," Will said.

Hannibal intrigue was in danger of crossing over into infatuation. "Can I see the dogs?"

Will showed him the dogs. They were well behaved and clean. Apparently Will took them to a stream to swim sometimes. They were friendly enough to Francis and Hannibal, but they adored Will.

"Are any of these your personal dogs?" Hannibal asked.

"No, they're back at my place." Will looked at him for a moment as though he wanted to invite him to meet the dogs, but if there was an invitation on the tip of his tongue, he never voiced it.

"Will collects strays. He's got all sorts. Winston is my favorite," Francis said. "The best behaved dogs I've ever seen."

"I suppose I'll meet them when you come to work on my kennels," Hannibal said to Will, "that is, if you agree to take the job."

"I'd have to see the terms of employment, but I think if you agree to my fee, I'd be happy to move on, as soon as Peter is able to operate without me," Will said. He looked over at Francis. "I mean, as long as that's okay."

Francis laughed slightly. "You almost sounded deferential. Not quite, but almost. As soon as you say Peter is ready, you can pack your things. I think my wife intends to give you quite a substantial bonus when you leave."

"Sorry," Will said, grimacing. Hannibal wasn't sure if he was apologizing for Francis' wife giving him a bonus or for not being deferential enough.

Francis excused himself and then Hannibal and Will were left alone. Hannibal couldn't resist asking, "Can you really turn these dogs from sweet creatures to vicious killers with a simple command?"

"I don't know if I'd phrase it as just a simple command. It's a process to get to the point where you can give a command and have them tear something apart. But you don't need a command when the hunt is on, you know? Because the nature of the hunt gets their blood up. I could tell you more about my process later, if you like."

"I anticipate a great many conversations with you about a great many things."

"Is it wise to cultivate that level of intimacy with an employee? Let's just keep things professional."

"Or we could socialize like adults. God forbid we become friendly."

"I don't find you that interesting."

"You will."

Will's eyes flickered in confusion, and then he took a breath. "I've got a lot to do if I'm going to be ready to leave for your place anytime soon. What were you thinking of paying me?"

Hannibal named a figure.

Will blinked slowly. "Jesus. That's a lot more than I've been getting, just so you know."

"I think you're worth it."

Will crossed his arms on his chest. "What's your game? I don't get why you care about me. I mean, I get your type likes having big hunting parties, but that's not you. I can tell that's not you. What do you want me for?"

"You may not find me interesting, but I'm very interested in you. The way you were able to read me is incredible."

"It's not an ability that I can teach you," Will said.

"You collect strays. I collect art. And I cultivate interesting friendships."

Will grimaced a laugh. "I'm not sure which one I am. But I've never been called art before, so I guess it's probably the second one."

There were many things that Hannibal would call Will. He was beautiful, intriguing, and fascinating. Hannibal had never been so interested in another person before. And what Alana Bloom had told him about Will being open to a certain kind of suggestion made Hannibal more than just fascinated.

"Will you come to discredit Miss Lounds tonight?" Hannibal asked. "I'm sure you have the ability, and I don't think the lady of the house would take issue with it if you did."

Will rolled his eyes. “I dunno. I think I’d feel a bit like a mean old crank, ruining everyone’s fun. I think everyone at the party can afford a slight fleecing.”

“You seemed angry with her before.”

“Maybe I’m in a forgiving mood.”

“I think you’re just avoiding socializing,” Hannibal said.

“I’m saving the party from having to deal with me in a certain mood. I can get self-righteous. Let the lady shake the table and have your fun,” Will said.

Hannibal nodded. “I’m looking forward to seeing you again. I will draw up a contract for you to sign before I leave here.”

Will nodded, and Hannibal walked back to the house alone.

# Chapter 3

In Hannibal's opinion, the séance went about how Will had predicted it would. Miss Lounds hadn't been able to find out anything about Hannibal, so she didn't throw any ghosts his way, despite the fact that his uncle Robertus' death had been announced in British papers. The others had some safe and predictable messages from people with initials suspiciously close to their loved ones, and everyone retired happy.

Afterward, Miss Lounds approached Hannibal. "I was very sorry the spirits didn't visit you today. I would be happy to come to any of your future house parties to see if a change of venue might help. Sometimes the energy is different where the loved one lived."

So that was why she hadn't tried to give him a message from his uncle. She knew he was interested in her skills, and wanted to secure an invitation to gain access to another set of society rubes. He had no interest in hosting her, and besides, Hannibal's sister had died in Lithuania. "I'll keep that in mind, Miss Lounds. Perhaps you have a business card you could share with me?"

"Absolutely," she said. She handed one over, and Hannibal put it into an inner pocket of his jacket. She continued, "I wonder if you could tell me anything about Will Graham. I heard that you were going to hire him to revitalize your kennels."

"Well then, you likely know as much about Mr. Graham as I do. I was impressed with his work, and I know he's finishing up what he did for Sir Dolarhyde. What kind of information are you looking for, exactly?"

She hesitated, and then leaned a little closer and said, "I wondered if you'd heard about his last employer. A man named Garrett Jacob Hobbs. He died while Will Graham was working at his estate. Some people say because Will worked at his estate."

"I'm not sure I understand what you're implying," Hannibal said.

"The spirits have told me that Mr. Graham had something to do with it. I know Hobbs' daughter; I arranged a séance for her to talk to him. His spirit said that Will Graham was responsible for his death."

"So you and Mr. Graham have met before this weekend?"

"No. He'd already taken a position here when I met Abigail–that's Hobbs' daughter. But when I met the man here yesterday I understood why there were questions about his involvement with Hobbs' death."

"What does Abigail say?"

"Abigail is confused and grief-stricken. She lost both her parents, and apparently Graham was kind to her. But I know what the spirits said."

Hannibal wasn't sure what to think, but he thanked Miss Lounds and excused himself from the conversation.

When he brought Will Graham the contract before leaving the estate the next day, he asked him about Abigail Hobbs, and after Will's prompting, told him what Freddie Lounds had told him about the situation.

Will shook his head. "What a crazy bitch. Honestly. I was working for Garrett Jacob Hobbs–that much is true. The man was intense about hunting. You have no idea. But I didn't have anything to do with his death! He cut his wife's throat, and then tried to kill his daughter. I sicced a dog on him just before he was able to cut her throat, and she ran to me. He was so upset he couldn't kill her he cut his own throat. I'm not sure how that makes his death my fault. Was I supposed to let him cut his daughter's throat?"

"She never said how you were involved, or what she told Abigail you had to do with it."

"And she said that Garrett Jacob Hobbs' spirit told her?" Will asked, with a peculiar intensity.

"Yes."

"I could have sworn she had no acquaintance whatsoever with spirits. But I…"

"Yes?"

"Sometimes I think I see him," Will said. He looked at his feet. "Since he died, I mean. But you have to understand. It's not that I can see spirits. You asked me how I do what I do–how I make reliable guesses about other people. I take little pieces of information that most people would ignore, and I use my imagination. My imagination is…it's scary and it's overwhelming. I thought I was seeing Hobbs because my imagination took hold of him. Because of what I saw him do. But what if he really is haunting me?"

"Miss Lounds offered to come to a future party at my home to do a séance. Perhaps if you attended, you could see the truth of it. Or, at the very least, see what game Miss Lounds is playing."

Will let out a shuddering breath. "I don't think so. The truth of the case was widely reported in the press. I don't need to justify myself to some jumped-up fake medium."

"She is well known in society circles. She specifically sought me out because I was hiring you to tell me terrible things about you. For whatever reason, she wants to sabotage your success. This isn't something you can afford to run away from."

Will shrugged, grimacing a smile. "Not everyone has the same definition of success. I don't need to make a ton of money. If she succeeds in poisoning people against me, I'll find something else to do for work."

Hannibal just smiled at Will, but he was determined to find out what was happening in Freddie Lounds' head. Perhaps if he had enough time with Will, he would be able to persuade

him to take steps to protect himself from her wicked tongue.

The contract was to Will's liking, and it was arranged that when Sir and Lady Dolarhyde came to visit, they would bring Will, his worldly possessions and his dogs, as well as their servants and whatever luggage they needed for an extended stay. The visit was arranged in a month's time, and Hannibal left the visit quite satisfied with it.

Over the course of the next month, Hannibal prepared an old cottage on his property for Will to inhabit. If Will refused to visit him in his home, he would simply go to the cottage and visit him. He followed Will's instructions on how to prepare his current kennel building for alterations, which Will sent via letters filled with messy writing and devoid of personal remarks. Hannibal's interest in him refused, however, to wane, though he had rather hoped he might move on from his fixation when the object of his fascination was no longer nearby.

In looking into the matter of Abigail Hobbs and her father, Hannibal engaged the services of a dear friend of his–Jack Crawford. Jack had come into the area at the behest of the local magistrate to investigate the deaths of some rather rude pigs. Hannibal had been happy to host him while he looked, and had even personally cooked him dinner. Jack was intelligent and principled, but he had a certain bias. He thought someone urbane, educated and rich couldn't possibly butcher people and cook them for their guests. This bias worked in everyone's favor and had kept the visit pleasant.

When Hannibal broached the subject of Abigail Hobbs to Jack in a letter, he was surprised that Jack came to visit to speak about the matter privately.

When Hannibal told him all of the particulars, Jack, who sat cozied up by the fire, shook his head. "I never met Will Graham, but I can understand how Fredrika Lounds got the impression that he was at fault for the disaster."

"Oh?" Hannibal asked. He took a sip of cognac.

"Apparently the Hobbs family had been living together in almost idyllic happiness for nearly twenty years, without a hint of friction. But when Will Graham moved in, things started to become apparent about the family. Things that no one but him had ever noticed before."

"And those things were?"

"There was a local legend about a spirit in the woods that would take young girls. At the time of Will's visit, this spirit had taken eight teenagers. Will Graham observed that, from their descriptions, they all sounded like the daughter of the house. He spent some time with her and her father, and he came to the conclusion that Hobbs, not some spirit, was responsible for the girls going missing."

"Did he make an accusation?"

"Not a public one. I don't think Miss Lounds knew about it. She would have been putting together some wild tales from the neighborhood and coming up with a mix of rumor and fiction. I think Abigail Hobbs might have encouraged her to spread rumors about her father being an innocent victim of an unsettling house guest."

“Do you think Abigail Hobbs was involved with her father’s crimes?”

“I can’t prove anything–the local magistrate wouldn’t hear my accusations–but I believe that the young Miss Hobbs actually lured the young girls into the woods where her father killed them. One of the things that was never put in any of the papers was the fact that after the elder Hobbs’ deaths, they found human remains inside the house. Inside the kitchen.”

“The man was feeding those young girls to his family?” Hannibal asked.

“Indeed. It’s almost too terrible to comprehend, isn’t it?”

This cannibal who had killed young girls had perhaps taken to haunting Will Graham. It was almost too delicious to be true.

“What has happened to Abigail Hobbs? Has she been sent to stay with relatives?”

“She has none. She’s been living in a convalescent home. I have no idea what will happen to her. Her father’s property was sold off and the money was given to the families of the young women he killed.”

That presented distinct possibilities. Hannibal got an idea about what home she might be staying at without asking directly, and then sent Chiyoh to go to the home and retrieve the girl, with an offer of honorable (if unconventional) employment. Hannibal already had an area of his home that was separate from the public areas–a nice furnished bedroom in the attic he’d created for another matter, which had since resolved itself–and he happily installed the girl when she arrived.

“You don’t want me to be your secret mistress, do you?” Abigail asked, her face rather tragic with fright.

“Of course not,” Hannibal insisted heartily. “I confess, the task I’ve hired you for is unorthodox, but it will not stain your virtue, nor will it harm your reputation.”

“I can’t believe I agreed to this without knowing what you wanted me to do,” she said.

“Well, in your defense, the money was good,” Hannibal said.

She looked around the attic. “And the room is as nice as promised. And I can go out into the woods now and then?”

“Yes, as long as no one sees you,” Hannibal said.

“What will I do when you don’t need me to do this secret task you’ve hired me for?”

“I suggest you look on the bookshelf. I’ve provided you with books on wide-ranging topics. If you find that you would like some books on another topic, let me know and I will do my best to procure them. I am also available to practice a variety of languages, if you’d like to do that.”

“So I’ll see you, then?”

“I will be cooking your meals and bringing them up to you,” Hannibal said. “If I’m not available, Chiyoh will take over.”

“Well. That sounds good. Thank you,” Abigail said. Hannibal rose to leave, but Abigail stopped him. “There was one thing. Can I still send and receive mail?”

“I was under the impression you had no family, and most of your friends had abandoned you.”

Abigail gave a watery smile. “I do have one friend. Freddie Lounds. I’ve been corresponding with her since just after my father’s death. I would like to keep up the correspondence.”

“You will not be able to send them from this address. I would have to get someone to post them from a neighboring town. But that can be arranged. And you mustn’t say anything about where you are or what employment you’ve taken on. And I must inform you that I will be confirming what you say and don’t say by reading your mail before I send it.”

Abigail nodded. “That is acceptable. Thank you.”

Hannibal went down to his library and poured himself a drink of wine, sniffing it before taking a small sip. It was excellent. He allowed himself a small smile. His plans were in order, and Will was due to arrive in a few days.

Let the games begin.

# Chapter 4

The drive up to Hannibal Lecter's estate was lined in chestnut trees, and beyond them, the green fields rolled off into the distance. The house itself was palatial and backed by forest. The mansion itself was made of gold-colored brick. Each corner held a turret, and intricate cornices and design features were more reminiscent of a gothic church than a house. A picturesque lake was centered perfectly in the yard, surrounded by perfectly symmetrical trees. Will, who had thought Sir Dolarhyde's home was insanely big and stupidly appointed, suddenly realized he was in a whole different world now.

When Will and his seven dogs stepped out of the carriage, he was surprised to see Count Lecter himself standing in front of the door to his home.

"Sir Dolarhyde and his wife stopped at her sister's place for a visit. They won't be here for a few days," Will said in lieu of greeting, convinced that the Count was only waiting to greet his guest, and would excuse himself when he realized that only his new employee had arrived.

Of course, Count Lecter continued to defy Will's expectations. "That's very lucky. That means I can personally show you the cottage I had outfitted for you and your pack, and help you get comfortable in your new situation before they arrive." He gestured for a servant to take Will's luggage, and then Will was forced to clarify that some of the luggage was his former master and mistress', which took some time to sort out.

Finally Will, Count Lecter and the dogs were on their way to the cottage.

"You don't have to personally take me," Will said as they walked toward the copse of trees behind the house.

"Rest assured, I rarely do anything because I feel I have to," Count Lecter said. "Besides, as you observed, I'm a member of the useless classes. I don't have anything better to do at the moment."

Will laughed. He was sure his inability to address the higher classes with the proper deference was one day going to cost him something major, but apparently today was not that day.

The cottage was out of sight of the main house, but not far at all. It was surrounded by trees, and looked old, but was comfortable inside. There was a kitchen area with a woodstove, a sitting room with a wood fire, and a single bedroom upstairs that was well-furnished and comfortable.

"The garden is walled, so that you can keep your dogs from running off, if that's a concern," Lecter said.

"Not usually, but if I have to be away all day that will be nice for them," Will said. He looked out at the garden. It was lovely. The cottage wasn't much more luxurious than the one he'd

stayed in at Dolarhyde's place, but it was more private. That had been attached, and several other servants had stayed there in adjoining homes, some with their families. This was a single home with no other houses in sight. "Who lived here before me?"

"No one since I took over the house. When my uncle died, my, well, the relationship is difficult to explain, but a family member became the gamekeeper. And she didn't want to stay so close to the main house, so we built her a place deeper in the woods."

"You have a female family member as your gamekeeper?"

"I told you my household was unconventional."

"How do you get away with that, exactly?"

"It helps if you're foreign. People will excuse a lot of things in me that they would find odd in a countryman."

"Would you like me to unpack the truck, sir?" one of the servants said as he walked down the stairs.

"No, I can do that," Will said.

"Yes, that will be all," Count Lecter said. He clasped his hands and looked at Will. "I can arrange refreshments for you, if you're hungry. Or I could show you the main house. Perhaps the kennels. Or would you prefer to rest after your travels?"

Will felt unaccountably restless. Must be from being locked up in the carriage for most of the day. He looked at his dogs, who looked at him with mute appeal. "I think I'd like to take the dogs for a ramble in the woods, if that's okay. I can't really get lost with them. They can always find their way back."

"I would love to join you, if you would allow it," Count Lecter said.

Will tried not to look at the man like he was crazy. "Is there a part of the woods I'm not supposed to see, or something? Or game the dogs might scare? I promise, I'll do my best not to disrupt anything."

"I have no concerns about that. I simply wanted to join you in your walk."

Will frowned. "Why?"

"To enjoy the woods, the dogs, and your company. To say nothing of the exercise. But if my presence makes you uncomfortable, you are welcome to take to the woods on your own."

'Taking to the woods' like he was a weird hermit instead of just a guy with dogs. This guy was both weird and kind of off putting. At least Will didn't have to live in his house. But socially awkward or not, Will didn't ever set out to be rude. "No, of course you should come along if you really want to," he said.

The count looked at him for a moment, and then smiled slightly. “No, I think I’ll return to the main house. If you’re feeling up to it after your walk, please come to see me afterwards.”

Will tried not to look too relieved. The count went on his way, and Will took the dogs out into the woods. For an estate that looked so cultivated and civilized around the manor house, the woods looked as if they had been left to grow wild, which wasn’t always the case. Some people actually had huge tracts of land cultivated like parks. Will was faintly incredulous about this idea, and none of the grand estates he’d been in so far had actually taken the idea that far.

After a nice rambling walk and occasional run, Will felt more comfortable in his skin and made his way into his employer’s grand home after dropping the dogs off at the cottage. When he went into the count’s study, he saw the man was writing at a table.

He looked up at the sound of footsteps and smiled slightly. “Ask Stone for some tea, please, Brown,” he said.

The butler nodded and went on his way.

“This is quite the house,” Will said, looking around at the amazing study. “I’ve never seen so many books.”

Hannibal twisted the cap onto his pen and stood up. “Do you like reading?”

Will nodded. “I liked what I’ve read. My father taught me what he could. He really liked the classics. Greeks and Romans, you know? I confess I haven’t had the time or resources to read much in the regular course of my life.”

“Consider my library yours. For the time you’re here, take anything you’d like off the shelf and keep it as long as you like.” He walked over to two chairs which faced each other, sat down, and gestured for Will to take the one opposite him.

Will sat down. “That’s…incredibly generous. I don’t know if I’d feel comfortable, though. A servant taking a book, even if they give it back, is tantamount to theft. If one of your servants saw me do it they’d think I was either up to no good or uppity as hell. I don’t know if I want to physically carry a book out of this library.”

“I don’t consider you a servant, but rather an employee of equal standing to myself. But I will defer to your feelings in this nonetheless. Perhaps I’ll have to visit you often, and bring you my favorite books.”

Will was almost certain that Hannibal had skillfully maneuvered the conversation in such a way that he could invite himself to visit Will. Having access to books for free without having to find and gain access to one of the few libraries scattered around the country was worth having to entertain the strange Count Lecter occasionally. He was distracted from having to answer by the servants coming in with tea and a three-tiered tray of sandwiches and cake.

As soon as the servants left, Lecter demanded that Will tuck in, and Will did. He found himself quite hungry and ate with his usual gusto, finding Lecter seemingly happy to watch

him eat with an enigmatic smile on his face.

“You don’t like sandwiches?” Will asked, noticing that the count was hardly eating. Will felt drowsy and strange, almost like he’d been drinking, but there was no alcohol in any of the offerings on the table. He sat back, feeling loose-limped and comfortable.

“The British propensity for sandwiches and other portable foods is practical for parties, but a little less so for an afternoon meal. It has taken me many years to accept this snacking in the sitting room. Doesn’t a nice soup and salad at a table sound better?”

“Well, to me, yeah, but I’m not actually all that well-versed in the social customs of the higher classes,” Will said. He wasn’t sure why he said that. He wasn’t exactly the most socially brilliant person around, but usually knew enough not to remind the upper classes that they were above him in standing. They already knew that, obviously. What the hell was in that tea?

“Truly, neither am I,” Hannibal said. The space around Hannibal’s head had started to glow faintly, and Will struggled to focus on what he was saying. “I was actually raised in an orphanage for part of my childhood. You weren’t wrong about my parents being dead. There has been war in my home country off and on for much of the century up to this point. My parents were killed in some fighting, and my sister and I were left alone during a hard winter. Misha didn’t survive it, but I did. And after the winter I was placed in a charity home for several years, until I was found by my uncle. After that, I spent time in a boarding school in France and a university in Italy. I confess I was never the type of boy who’s fellows would invite him home with them on a holiday. So I had not spent a great deal of time with families of my own class for many years.”

“And yet your manners are impeccable.”

“Simple manners go a long way, and much of my education in Paris was based on decorum. Many of my scholarly pursuits were self-taught, as is common with the leisure classes, who have the time for such frivolity.”

Will suspected the count was giving him this account of his life to explain his eagerness to spend time with someone who was obviously of a lower social strata than him, but perhaps he was simply open with everyone. Nevertheless, it was only polite to reciprocate, and even if he wanted to be his usual, reticent self, the confession seemed to tumble out of Will’s mouth without his permission.  “My father worked in the shipyards. He went to sea as a young man, but was injured and had to stay ashore and ended up marrying my mother. She was young and left us, and my father raised me alone.”

“Was he a good man?”

Will grimaced. “As good as I deserved, I suppose. I know it’s unusual for a man of his background to be educated–I always wondered if he’d had some kind of tragic reversal of fortune in his youth. He was an intelligent man, and provided as well as he could for me.”

“And how did you get into the business of caring for hunting dogs?”

Will laughed. “It sounds crazy, but I was attacked by a dog.” He took off his coat and undid the buttons on his cuff, then pulled up his sleeve. The flesh on his arm was severely scarred, but the muscle had not been destroyed. The count reached over and held his arm, his hands warm and gentle, and he turned his arm to see the full mark.

“It healed well,” Lecter said.

Will put himself to rights and put his coat back on, and replied, “Yes. I had help. The owner of the manor was very apologetic, and saw to it that the best doctor possible was called in to treat me. He also insisted that the dog be destroyed, and it took all of my powers of persuasion to convince him not to. In fact, he ended up giving me the dog as a pet, once he saw that I could train it.”

“And once he saw you could train that one…”

“Yes, he asked if I could train the others. Which led to me seeing the kennel he let those animals live in. Which led to me finding ways to house them better. And then he referred me to Mr. Hobbs.”

“And you had no formal training in any of this?”

Will shrugged. “It’s not like you can read about these kinds of things in Oxford. I think there are pockets of amazing and detailed local knowledge, but some people just don’t have it. And these middle class people who buy a big estate for hunting and just hire anyone to take care of the dogs might not get the kind of care their friends get from someone whose father and father’s father looked after the hounds, you know?”

“Nevertheless, it almost sounds as if your knowledge of animals came to you spontaneously. Like a gift from god.”

Will shook his head, laughing again. “I’m just good with dogs, is all. Nothing special about that, Count Lecter.”

“I beg to differ,” Lecter said. “And I must insist you call me Hannibal. Please. You know things about my life and childhood I’ve rarely told anyone. It would hurt me deeply if you once again insisted on keeping a professional distance.”

Will felt his cheeks heat. It was hard to believe he’d been so dismissive of the man when they first met, or even that he’d refused to go for a walk with him this afternoon. Something about the comfortable friendliness of their chat made the idea of not considering Lecter–Hannibal–a friend seem outlandish. Perhaps it was knowing that the impeccably dressed man had once been an orphaned child, or that he, like Will, was the type who’d never been invited to a friend’s for a holiday. “Alright, then,” he said, “friends.”

“And you must join me for dinner tonight, and often during the duration of Sir and Lady Dolarhyde’s visit. They both like you so much and would feel more comfortable at my table with you there, I’m sure.”

Will stood. “Yes, that might be a consideration for Francis. He’s incredibly shy, though he can hide it well at times. Reba doesn’t need any help from anyone, and makes sure everyone knows it.”

“Do you know how they met?”

“I don’t,” Will said. “But it was a fortunate connection for the both of them. They compliment each other in a way I’ve rarely seen.”

“Yes, it is fortunate for those people who are lucky enough to find someone they can call their better half without hyperbole,” Hannibal said. He stood as well. “Well, I suppose I will see you at dinner, then.”

Will took his leave, feeling optimistic about his stay at Hannibal Lecter’s home. He might even enjoy himself.

# Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> I just watched Lilo & Stitch for the first time, and like. Why would it make a good premise for a Hannibal AU??? I think Hannibal is a brain worm and I'm infected or something. Send help. But listen, Lilo & Stitch is about an alien killing machine who can't be hurt and a sweet little disadvantaged kid in a precarious living situation? Near the ocean. WHY DOES IT WRITE ITSELF? Is Hannibal the TV show ALREADY just Lilo & Stitch fanfiction? OHANA MEANS FAMILY, HANNIBAL, STOP TRYING TO KILL YOUR FAMILY! No, but seriously, why does Hannibal call Will his family if not Lilo & Stitch reference?? Why??
>
> That aside, here is the next chapter of my relatively normal fic.

Will was surprised to find himself in quite a state after visiting with Hannibal. As he walked to his cottage from the main house he felt his heart race and yet he felt strangely tired. The feeling of goodwill he'd experienced in Hannibal's study now turned a little hostile and he wondered why he'd told Hannibal secrets about his life.

Well, not secrets, exactly. But more than he'd intended to. He'd felt quite strange, and Will couldn't escape the idea that maybe there'd been something strange in that tea. It had tasted normal, he thought, but perhaps there'd been an odd ingredient in the sandwiches that hadn't agreed with him.

Hannibal was a foreigner, after all, and when Will had remarked that there was a strange taste he couldn't identify in the meat, Hannibal had said he'd used treatments and spices from his homeland.

Odd, for a nobleman to cook, but perhaps it was quite common in…where was Hannibal from again?

Will opened the door to his place and greeted his dogs warmly. If there was one thing that annoyed him about his lifestyle of working for various great houses, it was that he was constantly moving and exposing his dogs to new environments.

Will decided to take a nap before he was called to dinner, but then he remembered he'd have to dress for it and all his clothes were likely creased. When he went up the stairs to his loft he saw that his suit had been pressed and was hanging up. No, wait, that wasn't his suit.

There was a note on the extremely high quality suit hanging on the door of his wardrobe: "I hope you'll forgive me for indulging in one of my favorite pastimes (shopping for clothes) and purchasing you a suit. I beg you to make use of it, since I intend to invite you to dinner

constantly and my dinners are always black tie. Please, allow me this eccentricity and don't take offense at my gesture. Signed, Hannibal Lecter."

Will wasn't sure if he was offended or not. He had a suit that Sir Dolarhyde would consider adequate for formal dinners, but it was crammed in his trunk, and without a valet, it would be quite a process getting it prepped for that evening. It would be easier to simply wear the suit, although there was something about wearing clothes another man had bought for him which hit Will as a little improper. Perhaps even a little shameful. But he was too tired to argue, so he went to sleep, hoping he would wake up in time to change for dinner.

He did–just–and found that the suit fit him as though he'd been measured by a tailor. Which was slightly unnerving, but ultimately simply convenient.

The butler showed Will into the drawing room with an air of importance, and then remained in the room in order to prepare them cocktails. Will didn't know anything about that kind of drink, and simply asked for something with whiskey.

What he got was sweet and delicious, and quite intoxicating. He sat down in front of the fire and wondered where Hannibal was.

He didn't think to ask the butler, who in turn didn't volunteer anything.

Eventually, he was led into dinner by a woman who he assumed was the housekeeper. Will was surprised to see just two places at the table, and as he sat down, he wondered again where Hannibal was.

And then, Hannibal entered the room with two plates in his hands. He put the food down, fully plated as though they were in a restaurant. This is not how food was usually served in a great house, to say the least, and Will tried to school his expression to hide his astonishment.

As Hannibal sat down, he said, "I told you my household was unconventional."

"This looks amazing," Will said.

"Thank you. I prepared everything you will eat tonight myself," Hannibal said.

"Truly? My goodness. I mean, I knew you made the sandwiches this afternoon, but…You're an alienist, a landowner, a cook…and who knows what else," Will remarked. "I never thought I'd meet a renaissance man in modern times."

"I confess I don't sleep much, and I tend to find things to occupy myself. I enjoy sketching and playing the harpsichord as well. Please, try your first course," he said.

Will picked up the fork on the outside and put some of the strange looking food in his mouth. He closed his eyes. He savored. "Good god. What is this dish? It's incredible."

And then Hannibal was off, telling the long tale of how the dish was made. After they finished that one, Hannibal excused himself and returned with another fully plated dinner course and placed it in front of Will. It was even better than the last one. The courses were

not huge portions, but they were strange and strangely delicious, and Hannibal had a speech to give about each one.

“How are you accomplishing this? Isn’t the kitchen in a great house like this usually downstairs, or at least, miles away from the dining room?” Will asked.

Hannibal took a drink of his wine, looking coy. “You’ll force me to reveal all of my secrets.”

Will tried to deny any such thing, but Hannibal only laughed slightly and confessed to his methods. All of the plates were fully cooked and domed to keep warm in the antechamber, and he simply retrieved them in the proper order.

“I don’t always serve the entire meal myself, though I prefer it, for intimate parties,” Hannibal said.

For some reason Will felt his cheeks warm. Too much wine, perhaps. “I feel awfully guilty with you getting up and down all the time and serving me. I don’t think I’ve ever had someone of noble birth hand me anything, let alone serve me dinner.”

Hannibal took a sip of wine. Will noticed that the candlelight emphasized his sharp cheekbones. “I never feel guilty about anything I eat,” Hannibal said, “And you must bear my ministrations a little longer, as I still have to serve you dessert. It will just be a moment, as I have a few little things that can only be done at the last moment.”

“Of course,” Will said. He watched Hannibal rise. “Can I watch?” he asked, rather impertinently.

Hannibal seemed pleased, and gestured for Will to follow him. The antechamber was a place he never normally would have seen. Usually, he imagined, it would be filled with footmen and maids waiting to bring out a particular dish or pour drinks. It was empty now, but there were silver domed lids nestled against one another at various points on the table, and their dirty dishes were stacked high. Will inwardly winced at the idea of dirtying all those dishes for two people when they could have just put the food on one plate. Rich people.

“Do ignore the mess,” Hannibal said.

Will laughed. “I wouldn’t consider this a mess. I’ve made bigger messes in my sleep.”

Hannibal took the lids off of two smaller dishes. There was a brown and green frothy thing on each plate, and Hannibal began stirring a reduction and drizzling it over top. “Are you not a good sleeper?”

Will laughed. “That’s a strange way of putting it, as though there’s skill involved in sleeping. Though if there was someone who could teach me how to do it better, I’d be happy to learn.”

“If you’re interested, I have a wonderful tea that encourages good sleep. It’s not a sedative, simply a relaxation aid. It’s perfectly safe, and has been used in my homeland for probably a thousand years.” He grated something on the desert, and then took a small bowl of cream and began whipping it.

Will watched his hands, fascinated. “I don’t know. I’m probably fine. Being out in the countryside has done wonders for my nerves. There was something so…horribly close about being in the city. All those people together; as though their thoughts and energy drained mine.”

“That could be a side effect of your empathic abilities. Or perhaps simply a reaction to the pollution in town. There’s rather a lot of industry in London these days, and who knows what breathing in all that coal smoke can do to one?”

Will felt his shoulders actually relax at such a simple explanation. “That looks beautiful,” he said, gesturing to the plates.

Hannibal placed a dollop of whipped cream on the side of the plate and picked up both desserts, and then Will followed him out of the room. Hannibal waited for Will to sit down and then put the plate in front of him, giving a brief explanation of what it contained.

Will almost died when he put the dessert in his mouth. He literally had tears in his eyes. “Jesus, Hannibal. If you keep feeding me like this I may never leave.”

Hannibal didn’t seem worried by the prospect. “How long before you can increase the number of dogs in my kennel?” he asked.

“As soon as the renovations are complete I can get a breeding pair or two. Or, if you’d rather, I can simply purchase puppies who are nearing adulthood to speed up the process.”

“I suppose that there are a surplus of puppies around. Are you very strict about purchasing puppies of a particular breed? I notice you don’t have a favorite among your crowd.”

Will swallowed another bite of the manna in front of him, and then replied, “Do you do more hunting or shooting?”

“Personally, I prefer the activeness of hunting, though I’ve always liked my bird dogs more than the hunting dogs, if that makes sense,” Hannibal said.

“Bird dogs are usually smarter breeds,” Will said, warmed somehow by this sign of good sense in his friend. “You don’t need any other dogs for your property? Herders, or such?”

“I don’t know. I’ll have to ask my tenants. Perhaps if you stay forever to enjoy my cooking, I’ll have to keep you employed by getting into the dog breeding business.”

Will laughed, but he enjoyed the thought of finding a place that he could call home. He truly wanted no prestige from his talents, and would be quite happy if he could simply work for Hannibal (or some other rich person) for the rest of his career.

Will narrowly avoided scraping his plate, and then was ushered into the drawing room for cigars and whiskey, then finally, port in the drawing room.

They conversed in a strangely easy fashion the entire time, though no more personal stories were exchanged. At the end of the evening, Hannibal urged Will to borrow one of his books,

and promised that he could leave the house through the drawing room doors and no one would see him take it.

Will looked at the volume. He'd never heard of it before. "This isn't in French is it? I actually speak a little French, but not enough to read it."

"This volume features the original French text with a facing English translation. Do you know Charles Baudelaire?"

"I've never heard of him," Will said.

Will read some of the poems by the light of the lantern that night, and found the poems spoke to him more than any he'd ever read. There were lines about finding beauty in ugliness and evil–even murder. It was like he'd was reading his most unsavory thoughts upon the page, and he wasn't sure he liked it or not. His dreams that night were filled with strange and decadent things. He wondered if his nightmares were from the hobgoblins and evil things he'd read about, or the richness of the dinner. He woke up, sweating, sat up, and swung his feet to the floor. He placed a hand on the heads of each of his dogs in turn, who whined and looked worried about him, licking his hands and legs.

"Sorry for waking you," he said to them, petting them each in turn.

Winston nuzzled his hand and rested the weight of his head on Will's leg. "Sorry to worry you, Winston," he said. But of course the dogs would be worried. He should be the strong one, since he'd brought them to this new place. He was supposed to be the leader of their pack. The alpha. But he was a sweaty mess who'd been strangely prone to falling asleep ever since he arrived.

"Something in the air, maybe," he suggested to Winston. "Maybe there's a kind of pollen I'm not used to in the garden here."

He'd get used to it. He was sure he'd feel much better tomorrow.

# Chapter 6

Will spent the next few days overseeing the renovations and reviewing firming down Hannibal's specific requirements for dogs. It seemed like he had talked to some of his tenants, and they were interested in getting new herders, even though most of them who used herd dogs already had a beloved family of dogs, some had not previously been able to afford them or didn't know how to train dogs to do the herding.

Will was excited about the prospect of training both dogs and men, and wondered if Hannibal actually intended him to leave. Truth be told, if he wanted a kennel that was as nice as Sir Dolarhyde's, he would need a full time employee to oversee the kennels, and there didn't seem to be a man like Peter waiting in the wings for the job.

Will was used to not fitting in anywhere, and there was a part of him that was hoping that he might have found his place in life. Hannibal was benevolent and kind, and he was enthusiastic about both Will's work with dogs, and even the oddities of his brain. He even found himself depending on Hannibal to set him straight when things got too strange, or he thought he saw something that wasn't really there.

Hannibal was starting to feel like a paddle in a raging stream. Someone that was dependable and kept Will on course. He found himself trusting him more than he'd ever trusted anyone–found himself saying things to Hannibal that he would never say. Revealing darkness that he'd never before shown anyone, even in the quiet of his own mind.

And he enjoyed the woods near his cottage. He found, even with his extensive duties and his growing friendship with Hannibal, that he spent a good deal of time in the woods exploring.

One day, he even met Hannibal's mysterious gamekeeper. She was a beautiful and exotic woman, and he might have found himself taken with her, had he not known she was part of the master's family and thus well out of his reach. Plus, she seemed to hate him, for no reason he could discern.

He met her in the fields and asked her if she was indeed Hannibal's gamekeeper, and she conceded that she was.

He asked her, "Do you know what animal could be responsible for the animal mutilations I've seen?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, her expression guarded.

He described the animals he'd seen in the forest. There had been one, a badger, that had been decapitated and the head had been mounted on a stick. Another, a squirrel, had been nailed to a tree. There were others, too. Will knew, of course, that no animal had done it, but he wanted to make sure she hadn't done it, and by asking her about it, he realized she was innocent of the animal torture.

"So you haven't seen anyone–anything–that would have done these things?"

“Sounds like someone with a disordered mind,” she said.

“Is there anyone like that in town? Or at the estate? Perhaps someone that Hannibal is treating or has treated in the past?”

“The only person that Hannibal is treating is your former boss,” she said, “And he hasn’t arrived yet. Perhaps it’s someone who seems just like you and me, living a perfectly normal life.”

Will frowned and excused himself, wondering if that could be true. Of course, he knew it could be true more than anyone.

Will had learned that there was a danger to finding the evil in men’s minds. He’d blown up poor Abigail’s life, and now she was languishing in an asylum somewhere because she had nothing and nobody. If only he had some kind of permanence in his life he could offer her a place in his world–but he didn’t have enough of anything to have anything to offer her. She was of an age where he could justifiably offer to marry her, but she seemed still a child to him, and also, what kind of man killed a girl’s father and then offered to marry her?

He mentioned the idea to Hannibal, and Hannibal confirmed that offering to marry Abigail out of guilt when he thought of her as a child and had no real steady income or home for her was not a good idea. She was good as she was, and perhaps she would be able to get enough education behind the asylum walls to get a job as a governess.

He’d only been at the estate a few days when he was shocked to his core. He was out walking with the dogs, and he saw the most beautiful–horrible–thing he’d ever seen in his life.

Will came into the small clearing in the darkest, most isolated part of the forest, and there, he found a stag head with a full crown of antlers. Mounted on the stag was a naked woman, lying on her back, her organs on obscene display.

It made Will think of one of the poems in the book Hannibal had lent him:

*“O Loveliness! thou spurnest corpses with delight,*
*Among thy jewels, Horror hath such charms for thee,*
*And Murder 'mid thy mostly cherished trinklets bright,*
*Upon thy massive bosom dances amorously.”*

It was just like Will to think about a poem called “Hymn to Beauty” when faced with an abused corpse.

He felt disgusted with himself, but he had to do it. He had to imagine what the killer felt. He felt the darkness descend upon him like a cloud when he imagined the process. How he had met the girl. How he had slaughtered her and mounted her on the stag and then rearranged and sorted through her organs.

He spent more time than he would ever admit imagining it, and when he came to, his hand was in her stomach, feeling her insides. He pulled his hand away in alarm, trying not to think about the fact that she was still warm.

He didn't know what to do. Where to go. If he went back to the estate, he would have to mobilize everyone to come back and look at the body.

He decided that the best course of action would be to get Hannibal. Hannibal would know what to do. He would be able to make the judgment call, and perhaps, he would be able to reassure Will that finding whoever had done this terrible thing wouldn't backfire the way it had with Garrett Jabob Hobbs.

He found Hannibal in the garden, sketching flowers. His skill was almost supernatural, but Will did not allow himself to become distracted by that.

"You must come with me," he said. "You have to come to the woods with me."

He was on the edge of panic, and Hannibal took out a flask of something and offered it to Will, who took a rather long and bracing draught.

Hannibal smiled. "You're finally willing to relinquish your solitary time to take me on one of your rambles?"

"No, Hannibal," he got close, and lowered his voice. "I found a dead body. I told your gamekeeper about the animal mutilations and it was like she didn't believe me. But they were there! I saw them. And this time was so much worse."

"What kind of animal was it?"

"It was a woman. A naked woman," Will said.

Hannibal raised an eyebrow. "You know, most therapists would see this as possibly a symptom of sexual frustration. If it were a dream, of course."

"It wasn't a dream or a hallucination, Hannibal! You have to believe me. Please, come out to the woods with me."

Hannibal agreed, but he didn't alert anyone else to join them, or bring a gun, and Will knew he was being humored. He should never have stopped to wash the blood of his hand in the stream. That would have shown Hannibal.

They didn't say much as they walked, and the dogs circled around them, happy to have an unexpected bonus walk with another person. When they finally reached the clearing, Will was astonished.

"I swear to you, the woman was here. And the stag's head. It was huge. Even you would have struggled to move it on your own. It. Maybe we're in the wrong clearing?"

Hannibal took out his flask and took a swig, and then offered it to Will, who drank again.

Will looked around. There was a very large chestnut tree that was unmistakably the same one that had been at the edge of the clearing when he'd been there earlier.

"I don't understand. She was here. She was still warm," Will said.

“You touched her?”

The clearing suddenly got quite hazy. “I put my hand inside her. I felt her insides.”

“And how did that make you feel?”

Will squinted at Hannibal, trying to decide why he hadn’t run away. He decided he could trust him. “It was so beautiful, Hannibal. Made me think of that poem, Hymn to Beauty.”

Hannibal’s hand somehow made it into Will’s hair, and his caresses felt wonderful in Will’s curls. “What part?”

Will recited the passage, and Hannibal sighed in satisfaction.

“You’re lovelier even than I imagined. But Will, you have to know that this woman was never here. There was never a corpse, not even one spurned with delight. I should have not, perhaps, lent you such a controversial book of poetry. A man with your imagination is bound to be taken on a flight of fancy.”

This last statement took Will out of his semi-stupor. “You think my imagination illustrated the poem with a warm body on the forest floor?”

“I hope that that is the truth. The alternative is that someone killed a woman, left it here for you to see, and then managed to take the body away before you could bring me here to show me.”

Will nodded. It was true. It would actually be better for everyone if the body was just his imagination.

“Other than finding it beautiful, what did you learn from the body?”

“I think…” Will sighed, feeling as though he was half in a trance. “I think I understand Garrett Jacob Hobbs now. Even though he ate those girls, he did it to honor them. To use every part of them, like a good hunter should. This, this girl was killed for meat, but not to honor her. To shame her. No, not even that. The killer just saw her as meat. A pig. Nothing to garner any sympathy or excite any guilt. He was just a butcher carving ham.”

Will wavered, and he felt strong arms lift him.

“Hannibal? Are you carrying me? I’m not a child.”

“You certainly aren’t. But I feel a deep tenderness for you nonetheless,” Hannibal said. He started walking, bearing Will in a bridal carry.

“Why…why can’t I focus? What’s wrong with me?” Will asked.

“I think you’ve had a breakdown. I hope when I get you back to the house, you’ll stay with me for a few days, and perhaps even allow me to give you some of my alienist treatments.”

Will tried to protest, but he lost consciousness. When he woke up, he was in a guest room in the main house, and he was ravenously hungry.

He ate and felt so much better that he convinced Hannibal that he'd been sick and that was why he hallucinated. Hannibal reluctantly agreed to let him go back to the cottage as long as he promised that if he saw anything else alarming he would come to Hannibal at once, and he would submit to some of the man's alienist treatments for a disordered mind.

But he didn't seem to have any recurrence in the next few days, and Will comforted himself that he wasn't really losing his mind.

He was so thankful he'd had Hannibal with him throughout the entire ordeal.

# Chapter 7

The first night that the Dolarhydes stayed under his roof, Hannibal had had a successful dinner party with Will, Sir Dolarhyde, and Lady Dolarhyde. The food was wonderful, the wine flowed, and the conversation continued in the drawing room well into the evening. Unsurprisingly, Hannibal and Lady Dolarhyde carried the conversation, but Hannibal managed to persuade Will to give his opinion in a few small matters, and Sir Dolarhyde appeared happy enough.

Will seemed to have recovered from his ordeal. He was gaining confidence in himself and his reality once more, so of course, the time was nearing for Hannibal to shatter that confidence. Already Will had grown to depend on him, and with every crisis, that dependence would grow.

Hannibal didn't sleep much, as a rule. And now that he had Will exactly where he wanted him, he was busy trying to work out how he would expose his friend to seeing Abigail. Unfortunately, Will had those dogs. If they barked or growled when they saw the young Miss Hobbs, he'd suspect Abigail was a real person, not a ghost.

Hannibal resolved that he would have to make them some special sausage with a very gentle sleep aid. He wouldn't ever actually hurt them, but a small sedative wouldn't do them any harm. He'd test it out for the dosage on his own dogs, first. He had no emotional attachment to them.

With no time to waste, Hannibal mixed up a dose, ground some pork, and kneaded the powder into it. He reckoned the hardest part of dosing dogs was that Will's dogs were all different sizes, so would require less or more based on their body weight. Plus, one might be particularly greedy and eat two doses.

Hannibal would have to personally administer the drugs, or give them such a small dose that it would almost be negligible.

Hannibal laughed, suddenly, as insight hit him. "I'll just have Abigail make friends with the dogs," he said. He could contrive to keep Will away from his home and let her come visit the friendly dogs with (undrugged) food, and she could continue to bring them food when she was "haunting" Will. He threw away the ruined meat, washed up, and left the kitchen.

When he got back to his study, he found Sir Dolarhyde was waiting for him. He was sitting in the seat where Will often sat. There was something less than satisfying about seeing this other man take his place, but Hannibal shrugged inwardly and sat in his own place opposite Dolarhyde. He offered the man a drink, which he declined.

"Has Lady Dolarhyde retired?" Hannibal asked.

"Yes," Sir Dolarhyde said. "I went to bed, too, but couldn't sleep. I keep on thinking. I can't stop."

“What dangerous thoughts are troubling you, Sir Dolarhyde?”

Dolarhyde sighed. “Call me Francis. Anyone who I’m planning on telling all of this to should probably be on a first name basis with me. I haven’t even told my wife.”

“And why is that?” Hannibal asked. “Why tell me, and not her?”

Francis crossed his arms. “Don’t get me wrong. She’s not fragile. She’s tougher than anyone I know. She’s wonderful. I don’t want to risk her thinking of me differently. Seeing me–figuratively, of course–in a way that I don’t want her to.”

“So you tell me, because I mean less. Is that why you chose me over one of your other friends who dabble in alienism? Or indeed, a professional alienist in London?”

“I confess, the reason I wanted to tell you over anyone is because I read your paper on the evolutionary origins of social exclusion. That, combined with the fact that you use hypnosis, is what convinced me you were the one to treat me.”

“Why hypnosis?”

Francis fidgeted. “So you have no questions whatsoever about why your paper would interest me? I’m that much of an outcast, evidently.”

“You’re hardly an outcast. You have a marvelous wife, a circle of local acquaintances in London, and a completely separate one in your country home. You seem rather socially brilliant, actually.”

Francis worried at a loose thread on his sleeve, saying nothing.

“Why do you want me to hypnotize you?” Hannibal asked again.

Francis signed again. “I’m not the one who needs the help. There’s something…dangerous…inside of me. You see, it all started when I first saw Blake’s Great Red Dragon paintings.”

“And what did you see in his work?”

“I saw…I saw myself. Or perhaps, what I could become. And I didn’t know it at the time, but something began to grow. When I met my wife, she quieted me. Quieted the dragon. But now it’s back. It speaks to me. And I can no longer quiet it.”

“And you can’t communicate with it, either, if I understand you.”

“That’s right. The Great Red Dragon can certainly make his desires known. I know what is expected of me. But I don’t know how to tell it that I’m not interested in becoming something new.”

Hannibal nodded. “I’ve never been in a situation like this before. I’m not certain that hypnosis is the solution. Some people are extremely resistant to hypnosis, and some very susceptible. I’m not sure which one you are, or indeed, which the Great Red Dragon is. Perhaps we should try?”

“Will it still work if I’m tired?”

“Actually being slightly tired is often beneficial. Helps you to relax. But if you would characterize yourself more as being in a state of exhaustion, we should wait for another day.”

“No, let’s try it,” Francis said.

Hannibal brought over a lamp with an oscillating damper that made the light flicker, and placed it between them, turning it slightly towards Francis. He turned it on, and the light began to pulsate. He went through his hypnosis process, and, finally, he decided Francis was deeply hypnotized.

“What is troubling you?” he asked.

When Francis spoke, his voice was deep and eerie. “You are troubling me, you little man.”

Hannibal bristled. He was slightly shorter than Francis, but he was hardly little. He shook off his annoyance and continued. “And why is that?”

“You are here to help Francis destroy me,” he said, continuing to speak in the deep, throaty voice.

“I don’t know if destroying you is really what’s best for Francis. I think perhaps he has some things to learn from you.”

“He can learn nothing from me. All he is is the chrysalis. I am the thing he will become.”

Hannibal was really starting to like this fellow. “Indeed?” he asked. “And how will he become you?”

“He has to change people. I can tell you how,” he said, his voice turning sly.

“By all means,” Hannibal said.

And the Great Red Dragon proceeded to tell exactly how, in an orgy of blood, Francis would bring him forth through killing entire families on the cycle of the moon.

Hannibal was torn. He was really quite preoccupied with Will at the moment, and he liked Lady Dolarhyde. He knew that if he helped the Great Red Dragon to Become, it would likely be the end of their marriage, or perhaps the end of her. But he was captivated by the creature's words, and by his violent impulses. It would go against everything he stood for–who he was–to not do his utmost to help Francis become his best self. In fact, he would be a terrible alienist if he allowed Francis to retreat into his sad, retiring personality when he had a chance at greatness.

But not yet.

He managed to pacify the dragon. Told it to bide its time and wait for conditions to be right. Made some vague references to the natural cycles of life. By the time he brought Dolarhyde

out of his trance, he was fairly certain he'd convinced the man to wait until the next full moon to act.

Francis blinked rapidly as he came out of the trance. “I feel better. I think he’s still in there, but he seems…quieter. What did you say to him?”

“I expressed some of the concerns you have to him. About going to jail, and losing your wife. He was…I won’t say understanding, but he seemed slightly cowed. I’m sure it will take multiple sessions.”

“Of course,” Francis said. He smiled. “I think…I think he trusts you. He feels. I don’t know. It’s like he feels safe now. But not in a way that scares me. More like…he’s satisfied, for the moment.”

Hannibal wasn’t sure exactly what that meant, but he was happy that his client was happy, and Francis decided to go to sleep.

Hannibal debated going up to talk to Abigail, but thought she was likely in bed by now, and interrupting her sleep would not be the best thing for her.

The next few days were very busy all around. Lady Dolarhyde spent her time acquainting herself with the local gentry, Will was hard at work on the kennel, Abigail was sneaking into Will’s house and having a ball rolling around on the floor making the acquaintance of his dogs, and Hannibal was learning more about the Great Red Dragon.

Everything came to a standstill a few days after the Dolarhydes had arrived when the post came. Shortly after, Will came barreling into Hannibal’s study brandishing a letter.

“My goodness. What has happened?” Hannibal asked.

“Freddie Lounds happened. I’m sure of it,” Will said.

Hannibal waited for Will to say something sensible.

Will huffed an exasperated breath. “She’s taken Abigail out of the hospital. I mean, I hope she has. It’s either her or Nicholas Boyle–the brother of one of the victims. Or there was another visitor no one can seem to describe–she sounded foreign in some way, but wore a veil like a syphilitic.”

“Could it be the young Miss Hobbs simply left the hospital of her own accord?”

“Where would she go? She’s young, has no education, no friends, and no place to go. If she left she would be open to a far worse fate than she’d ever find in the convalescent home.”

“Perhaps she has resources you’re unaware of,” Hannibal said.

“I have to go there to talk to those people,” Will said. “Would that be alright? I just have to make sure she’s okay. I know I have a contract with you, but I promise that I’ll be back soon.”

Hannibal nodded. “I would be happy to release you from your duties on one condition. You must allow me to come with you.”

Will’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Why would you want to do that?”

“I admit, when you told me the story of the young Miss Hobbs, I was intrigued. I asked my friend–an investigator named Jack Crawford–about what happened. I know some of the particulars you didn’t share with me. I would be very interested in talking to Miss Hobbs about her father’s crimes, if she was willing. I would even pay her. To that end, she must be found.”

Will’s suspicious expression cleared. “You’d pay her to talk about her father?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t necessarily even publish my findings unless she wanted me to–or until after she was dead.”

“What would that accomplish?” Will asked.

“I would understand,” Hannibal said.

Will looked at him with a strange intensity, opened his mouth to say something, then appeared to change his mind and closed his mouth. “If we went together I could avoid taking the mail coach. I assume you travel more comfortably?”

“You assume correctly,” Hannibal said. He laced his fingers together. “You may have been able to gain freedom from your duties from your employer, but I have yet to do the same with mine. Please allow me an hour to consult with Sir Dolarhyde and pack some things.”

“You want to leave today?” Will asked.

“How many days has it already been since the people at the hospital last saw the girl? It appears there’s not a moment to lose.”

Will nodded.

Francis was happy to allow Hannibal to leave on his “emergency” and claimed he had business of his own to attend to, that his therapy had been forcing him to neglect.

Hannibal had his valet put together a hasty but fashionable trunk of clothes for him, and he threw together a boxed lunch he and Will could eat on the road if a suitable Inn failed to materialize.

He knew the town where the convalescent home was situated; there was a nice Inn where they could stay the night for however many nights were required. He hoped they wouldn’t be away from the estate for long, however, because now that there was concern about Abigail being in peril, it was the perfect time for her to appear in Will’s vicinity and begin “haunting” him.

If all went well, Will would think he was not just being haunted by Garrett Jacob Hobbs, but going crazy. And then who would a trusting young lad go to for help but his kind employer

who was known to dabble in alienism?

Hannibal could hardly wait.

# Chapter 8

By the time they reached the town where the convalescent home was situated, it was already too late to actually go in and talk to anyone. Will wanted to try to go in anyway, but Hannibal successfully argued they should go get a room at an Inn, have some dinner, and go in with their questions first thing.

Will, Hannibal reckoned, would be perfectly happy to stay in the barrack-style public rooms, but Hannibal urged him to stay in a private room with him. This was not unusual. Friends on the road (if they were same sex friends) might safely share a bed without arousing any suspicion because many people had never slept in a bed alone in their life. The serving girl assumed Will was Hannibal's valet, though he was not dressed like one, and said she'd bring up blankets for him to make a pallet on the floor while they had dinner in the common room downstairs.

"You really don't have to let me stay in your room, Hannibal," Will said. "I would be fine downstairs."

"And I'm fine sharing with you. Though I must say one of the worst things about living in England is the lack of good bathing facilities. A bath is nice at home, but after being on the dusty road? It's awful not to have one," Hannibal said.

"There are a few public bath houses in London. Not surprising, I suppose, that there's nothing like that around here. I confess I love your place because there's a stream right by my house. I bath in it all the time," Will said.

Hannibal tried to appear disinterested. "You sound as though you think it's improper."

Will shrugged. "Most people don't like the idea of running into a full-grown naked man in the woods. I usually bathe at night so I won't alarm anyone, I promise."

Chiyoh might see him, but Hannibal thought seeing a naked man might do her some good. He didn't want her to desire Will, but something should shake her out of her complacency and desire to hide away in the woods.

"Where I'm from, people crack open the ice in the winter to bathe after a hot steam in a sauna. I would never condemn you for bathing. One of the ways I'm unconventional, I suppose."

"I'd like to hear about the continent," Will said. "I've never traveled. Maybe you could tell me at dinner."

This presumption of Will's, that they would eat dinner together, made Hannibal happy. Just a week ago Will would have insisted on eating apart from Hannibal, but now he took their friendship for granted.

Hannibal claimed he had a headache and asked for a private room to eat in. It was a nice intimate dinner; the kind of dinner they hadn't been able to have since Sir Dolarhyde and his wife had arrived. Sir Dolarhyde, while fascinating, was starting to wear on Hannibal. He wished that he could have given the man his undivided attention, if for instance he'd met Dolarhyde at a different time in his life. He had always been an incredible multitasker; he didn't procrastinate or lose focus, and he rarely slept. But he was having a hard time focusing on anything else but Will.

He told Will about Paris and Florence and Athens at dinner. He tried to make the stories intriguing and enticing with the vague notion that maybe one day he and Will might visit those places together. If his friends thought bringing a man like Will traveling with him was odd, he and Will needn't return to England.

Will was interested in art and culture, though he didn't have a lot of knowledge about it. He had gone to plays when he lived in London, and the thought of him going alone to the theater made Hannibal feel eager to treat him to more shows. Better ones. And to show him art galleries and concerts and buy him so many books he'd need his own library. A man so naturally intelligent only needed to be exposed to culture to be able to benefit from it.

But he was getting ahead of himself. Will's primary concern seemed to be Abigail Hobbs. And his dogs. He liked Hannibal as a friend, and he depended on him.

Just not enough.

When they went back to the room Will washed at the wash bin without self-consciousness. Hannibal tried not to stare, but was disconcerted to notice that Will was rather more beautiful with his clothes off than with them on. He had noticed Will's beauty from the start, but he hadn't really acknowledged to himself that his desire for Will's friendship might be so covetous, so desperate, because it was a desire for more than Will's friendship. Will quickly changed into his nightclothes and placed his clothes neatly in the wardrobe, and then he went and sat on the bed.

When it was Hannibal's turn to wash up, he made sure the wash bin was in a part of the room that would provide good lighting for his assets, and he tested the waters.

"Who will you claim to be tomorrow?" he asked.

Hearing Hannibal's voice, Will looked at him. His eyes, disappointingly, did not linger over Hannibal's wet and naked chest. "They'd know if she had a brother. She had no family, and would likely have told the people that."

"You could be someone from her neighborhood. You lived there so would be able to fake that well," Hannibal said. He changed the angle of his pose and Will didn't appear to notice.

"That'll work," Will said. He stood and started to put together the blankets on the floor.

"Please, I promise you I don't mind sharing," Hannibal said. He put down the cloth. "Unless you mind? Have I made you uncomfortable in some way?"

“No, no of course not,” Will said hastily. “You’ve been incredibly kind. I just feel like I’m taking advantage. You drove me here and you’re paying for the room. I shouldn’t be able to crowd you in your sleep, too.”

“Do you make a habit of crowding people you share a bed with?”

Will’s mouth twitched as though he was suppressing a smile. “I don’t. But I might. Well, I’m a bad sleeper. Especially since I saw the–thought I saw the body in the woods. I’ve been having nightmares.”

“Oh?” Hannibal took the rest of his clothes off and put on his nightshirt. “Nightmares about what?”

“The body.”

“What about it? Is your nightmare just seeing it, or–”

“I kill her. I kill her over and over, Hannibal. Aren’t you glad you asked?” Will said, grimacing.

Hannibal went to Will’s side and sat down beside him. “I am, in fact,” he said. He ran a hand down Will’s back. Will flinched away at first, but then allowed the contact. “How do you kill her?”

With Hannibal’s hand planted firmly on his back, Will gives a tearful, tortured account of how Hannibal killed her. New feelings for Will bloomed under the knowledge that he could "see" how Hannibal had killed someone and why, and how it felt. The fact that Will could read him with such startling accuracy almost made him feel overcome. But that wasn’t what Will needed to hear. It would confuse and shock him at this point.

“Will, you have no need to feel guilty for a death that never happened.” He rubbed Will’s back soothingly. “No one was missing from the village, and no body was ever found. I did have Chiyoh keep an eye out for anything strange.”

“You didn’t tell her I saw a body, did you?” Will asked fretfully.

Hannibal paused. “Will, you can trust Chiyoh just as much as you can trust me. I promise you. If you are ever in trouble and you can’t get to me, you must promise me you’ll trust her.”

Will nodded. “So you did tell her.”

“I never said that. Why would it concern you? She rarely interacts with my guests. Your secrets are safe with her,” Hannibal said.

“Maybe I don’t want the beautiful woman who lives on your grounds to think I’m crazy,” Will said, a smile in his voice.

Hannibal took his hand away from Will’s back and stood up. “She wouldn’t be interested in you, so I wouldn’t fixate on her, if I were you.”

“I wasn’t! I promise. I know I’m not the same class as either of you. I would never presume,” Will said, his voice slightly panicked.

Hannibal was in no mood to be placated. “I’m going to read a bit before I sleep. Please, turn down the bed and sleep.”

Hannibal expected him to do just that, but he didn’t. He stood and walked closer, so that he was a breath away from Hannibal, and put a hand on Hannibal’s shoulder. “I promise you, I would never. She’s safe from my attention.”

“She’s remarkably capable of taking care of herself. I’m not worried in the least that you’re even capable of hurting her,” Hannibal said.

Will didn’t remove his hand from Hannibal’s shoulder. “No, I mean. It sounds. Um. You’re the one whose good opinion I want. And not because I’m your employee. I respect you so much. And I’d like to be able to call you my friend, if you would permit it.”

“I would enjoy that very much. I feel like I’ve been very vocal about wanting that,” Hannibal said.

“You have. And I’m sorry I’ve been reluctant to be friendly. I’m not to everyone’s taste. I didn’t want to scare you off.”

“You could never scare me, Will,” Hannibal said, his voice a little deeper than it should be.

The light was dim, but Hannibal thought Will might have blushed. Will smiled and gestured to the bed. “You’re still willing to share?”

“Of course,” Hannibal said.

Later, when the fire was low and the room was dark, he heard Will stirring in his sleep. Hannibal lit an oil lamp, and sat and watched him. He was sweating, fretful, and moved with tortured swings of his head. Hannibal knew it wasn’t advisable to wake someone from a nightmare, plus, he was enjoying seeing Will suffer. He suffered beautifully.

Eventually, Will sat up, his eyes open.

“Are you awake?” Hannibal asked.

Will panted, his face sweaty. With a bit of creative thinking, Hannibal could imagine Will sweaty and out of breath from far more pleasant pursuits. He reached over and put a hand on Will’s forearm.

“Don’t!” Will said, pulling his arm away. “I’m disgusting.”

“Sweaty, perhaps. But never disgusting,” Hannibal said. He put an arm around Will’s shoulders, and, surprisingly, Will folded into his embrace as though he’d been made for it.

He held Will until his racing heart and breath slowed to a normal pace, and then Will started to shiver. “Take your nightshirt off,” Hannibal said. “You’ll freeze. It’s soaking wet.”

“I’ll be naked,” Will said.

“I’m not worried,” Hannibal said.

Will shrugged and took off his nightshirt. He looked at Hannibal with a guarded expression. Hannibal interpreted it as saying he wanted back in Hannibal’s arms, but didn’t know how to say it. If he’d established himself as a safe place for Will to land during a nightmare, he was happy with his night’s work. He reached over and dampened the oil lamp, and then, in the dark, he reached his arm around Will’s shoulder.

Will went willingly, tucking himself into Hannibal’s side. Hannibal pulled the blankets up over the two of them, and Will muttered into his neck. “I’m sorry I’m such a baby. I was just. It was scary. It was so real. Sometimes I don’t know what’s real, when I wake up.”

“I’m real, Will. I promise you.”

Will hummed contentedly and went to sleep. The next morning they woke, slightly warmer than usual, with Will still wrapped in Hannibal’s arms.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. That’s way more than you should have to deal with. I told you I’m a bad sleeper,” Will said, his face a mask of embarrassment.

“I had an extremely pleasant sleep. I’d be very happy to repeat the experience,” Hannibal said.

Will smiled. “That’s kind of you. You must have slept with your little sister when she had nightmares. You’re an old pro at offering comfort. Unless. I mean, were you ever married?”

“I’ve never been married. I did have a mistress for several years, but we decided we were better as friends.”

“Oh.”

“But you’re right. I didn’t develop any skills in comforting someone from her. Bedelia du Maurier is a remarkably self-contained woman. She wouldn’t have condescended to need comfort even from me. The last time I held someone that way was Misha.”

“I’m sorry if I brought up any bad memories for you,” Will said.

“They were good memories. Like I said, I’d hold you in my arms any time you like.”

Hannibal thought for a moment he’d gone too far, but perhaps the mention of Bedelia had made Will feel that he couldn’t possibly want Will that way. At any rate, he smiled and threw off his covers to get dressed.

Hannibal tried not to stare at his gorgeous bottom, but finally he decided the best he could do was to not stare that obviously.

# Chapter 9

The visit at the sanatorium couldn't have gone better if Hannibal had planned in advance what everyone was to say and given them a script.

The workers at the sanatorium were all alarmed for Abigail's safety, very cognizant of the fact that she had nowhere to go, and had not drawn any obvious conclusion between Chiyoh's visit and Abigail's disappearance. They also greeted Will as though he had every right to ask after Abigail, likely assuming he was a suitor, though Will never claimed to be one.

They left with no clues as to where to go, although Will had a box of Abigail's possessions which she had left behind on Chiyoh's instructions.

"So it seems that she truly left without packing," Hannibal observed in the carriage ride back to the Inn.

"I'm not sure about that," Will said.

Hannibal waited.

Will sighed. "There's no letters from Freddie Lounds. Not one. I know they were corresponding because Freddie told me, and I'm sure she's a liar, but she wasn't lying about that. There's the very real possibility that Abigail finally saw through Freddie and threw out the old letters, I suppose, but there's also the possibility that she's with Freddie and took the letters her friend sent her to cover up the arrangements that were made in the correspondence, or possibly just for sentimental reasons."

Hannibal inwardly cursed. Everything had gone perfectly but that. Reluctantly, he said, "If you would like me to invite Freddie Lounds to visit, I would be willing. I don't know how I would explain the invitation to Lady Dolarhyde, but I would do it for you."

Will placed his hand on Hannibal's and looked deep into his eyes. "Thank you. Let's hold off for now. But…let's keep it in mind," he said.

"So, shall we head back?" Hannibal asked. He squeezed Will's hand and let go.

"I'd like to ask around town a bit. See if anyone saw her get in the mail coach, or any other kind of carriage."

Hannibal didn't like the sound of that, but he trusted Chiyoh's discretion. "I'd be happy to accompany you."

"I'd rather you didn't. I think people are more liable to talk to me than someone like you. They might think you're going to get her in trouble because of your status."

"People tend to do as I say because of that status. It might be an asset to you," Hannibal said.

“No, I don’t think it will be in this case. But, if you don’t mind, could I get a small advance on my wages? Just enough to pay some bribes. I might not even need it, but just in case–”

“Of course,” Hannibal said. He took out his purse and gave Will a fair number of coins.

“Thank you. I’ll meet you back here when I’m finished.” He got out of the carriage as it ground to a halt outside the Inn.

Hannibal worried a little about what Will might find out something useful about Abigail’s disappearance, but he was confident that Will would immediately come talk to him about it, so he would be able to do damage control.

It was too late to start to travel back when Will returned to the Inn. Hannibal was certain he hadn’t eaten, so he was happy that he had waited to have dinner for Will’s return.

When they were seated and Will was ravenously eating the serviceable Inn stew, Hannibal listened as he recounted what he’d learned.

“Abigail left alone on Tuesday morning. She didn’t take the coach. She had a small carpet bag and made a few small purchases before she left.”

“And how did she leave?”

Will shook his head. “I don’t know. But she was seen walking out of town.”

“You think she met someone on the road?”

“Well, she could have met someone by prearrangement, or she could have set off somewhere on foot and encountered someone dangerous.”

“She could have also encountered someone friendly. She might be fine,” Hannibal said.

“Of course. And I know I have no particular right to know her whereabouts,” Will said glumly. “She probably thinks of me as the man responsible for her father’s death.”

“Shall we return home tomorrow?”

Will nodded. “I think we should. Thank you for coming here with me. You’ve been very kind.”

“Ralph Waldo Emerson says ‘the only way to have a friend is to be one’. And there is no need to thank me for the kindness between friends. I know you would do the same for me.”

Will shook his head. “I don’t know, Hannibal. Friendship doesn’t exactly come easy for me. If I do anything to make you think I don’t value your friendship, please tell me. I wouldn’t want to alienate you with my…I don’t know, my personality, I guess.”

A few days ago Hannibal would have said that his personality was charming or wonderful, but knowing that he had real romantic feelings–feelings he wasn’t even aware he was capable

of, anymore–held him back from being as effusive as he'd been with Will all along. He said something neutral, instead.

There was no nightmare that night, and so Will and Hannibal lay beside each other in bed without touching.

Hannibal wished he knew how to induce nightmares. Wouldn't that be a wonderful skill to have?

They set off early the next morning, and were home in time to dress for dinner. Sir Dolarhyde looked edgy, as though Hannibal's absence had set him back and strengthened the dragon within him. Something would have to be done with him.

That night, Hannibal visited Abigail. She looked even paler than she'd been when she arrived, and she paced in a worrying manner. Being locked in an attic apparently didn't agree with her. Hannibal would have to keep an eye on that.

"The dogs love me. They don't even bark when they see me," she reported.

"Well, if they run up to lick you that could be just as revealing. But hopefully Will will be so focused on being confused about your presence that he won't notice."

"Yeah, dogs probably don't run up and lick ghosts. That's what you want me to be, right? A ghost?"

"Mr. Graham will draw his own conclusions about what you are."

"What are you trying to do to him, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I see a great deal of potential in our Mr. Graham. He's found himself a comfortable job with animals he loves. I don't think he'll reach his potential if left to his own devices. I want to see him become the truest version of himself."

"And what would that look like?"

"I have no idea. I have certain hopes for him, but I never really know what's going to emerge from the chrysalis."

Abigail looked frightened, but what she said was, "he's lucky to have a friend looking out for him like that."

"You know, Abigail, I see potential in you as well," Hannibal said.

Abigail smiled shakily, tears in her eyes. "You know that I helped my father hunt, don't you?"

"I see many things."

"And you don't want to punish me?"

“I want you to reach your full potential. If that means hunting like your father, then I want to give you the confidence to do it on your own. If it means something else, I have the resources to help you make that happen.”

“Thank you for your patronage,” she whispered, curtseying. “I’ll visit Will for the first time tomorrow night.”

Hannibal decided that the best thing to do was to prime Will to react to Abigail’s visit with horror. He would have to get him in a susceptible frame of mind. He’d drugged him before; a lovely tea laced with ephedra. It had left him rather open to experiences. He could do the same, but the more he learned about Will, the more he realized that Will’s imagination was wondrous. The boy might not even need hallucinogens. The right stimulus might cause his imagination to run wild without any chemical help. Besides–why go to the trouble of hiring Abigail and then have Will possibly hallucinate through their first encounter?

But he wanted Will to be relaxed and soothed. It would be Abigail’s first time ‘haunting’ him, too, and she might be nervous or unbelievable at first, before she cut her teeth on the role. So Hannibal determined that he should give Will a sedative of some kind–something to slow down his reaction time and give him a slight sense of unreality. And he would need to put Will in the correct mindset, too.

He’d landed on a lovely way for that to happen. A guest Hannibal had been entertaining in one of the several small cabins in the large wooded area behind the manor house was becoming a bore, so it was about time to do away with him.

Hannibal had thought perhaps he had potential, but he’d been mistaken. All that was left to do was dispose of him and expose Will to his corpse. The scene he’d shown Will before had been rather stark and out of character for him–more designed to evoke Garret Jacob Hobbs than to express any of Hannibal’s own design.

He needed to make a beautiful, ghastly tableau that Will would see but doubt the veracity of. He could walk with Will and have him look through the window of the cabin and see the body, but Will had seemed to enjoy the tactile aspect of the last corpse he’d left for him. He would allow his dear boy to have a close encounter with the body, and he would be there with him to see. Perhaps if he was lucky, Will would go into that sort of trance state he’d entered when he’d told Hannibal about the last body he’d given him. Then, when Will attempted to go get help to deal with the body, he’d simply chloroform him and transport him back to the main house, leaving Chiyoh to dispose of the body.

He wouldn’t need to drug Will any further, as the effects of chloroform might linger for a couple of days, depending on Will’s tolerance for foreign substances in his body.

He had several ideas about what he wanted to say to Will, but he wasn’t sure how to represent them visually. He would like to take the man and fold him up into the shape of a heart, but he felt that that wasn’t visceral enough for Will. He wanted the image to horrify and seduce. He wanted Will to be shocked and drawn in in equal measure. But he also wanted to give Will a message. To reach out to another lonely soul and offer him companionship. If he was right and Will could accurately interpret that message…what a rare boy he would be.

Well, he had been disappointed before, so he wouldn't get his hopes up. But he needed to make the attempt. He had to. He'd tried seducing Will the old-fashioned way, and the darling boy had been rather oblivious. Whether that was because he was simply socially awkward and rather innocent, or truly not willing to entertain a man in bed remained to be seen. If there was a true meeting of minds, Hannibal would be willing to be with him without expressing his feelings physically, but spending time in the same room, being able to admire his perfect form and innocently touch him…he could be satisfied with that.

He set off early in the morning and killed the man rather quickly. He wasn't usually so perfunctory, but he had a lot to do. "My apologies for not drawing out your last experience on earth," he said to the man as he bled out onto the forest floor. "I'm sure you would have loved the pain as much as I would have loved inflicting it. I have to follow a rather tight schedule, however."

He removed the man's kidneys, as he knew Will enjoyed kidney pie as he'd mentioned it on the road. He set those aside and got to work.

He had a masterpiece to compose.

# Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

> I just finished my first draft of an original novel I've been writing since June, which means I'll need to take a break from that before I revise. Which means I will be updating my various Hannibal projects in the next few months!

Will tried to greet his work with the same enthusiasm he always had, but there was something worrying at the edge of his mind all day. Where was Abigail? Was she okay? Had something terrible happened to her, or would something happen to her in the future?

The preoccupation didn't entirely stop him from enjoying his day. The builders were starting the addition, and he'd had to move the dogs around to keep them from getting scared by the noises. This meant he'd taken the hounds, who weren't used to running free outside of hunting, out into a pasture and played with them. They played much more roughly than pets, but Will enjoyed their viciousness. There was a part of him that could relate to it and admired it in them, though he was loath to admit it to himself.

He wondered what Hannibal would think about that. He had a feeling that Hannibal would applaud his embracing his animal instincts, although he wasn't sure why. There wasn't anything on the surface of Hannibal that was anything less than refined, but something in him called to something in Will. Something wild, and untamed. Something, admittedly, Will had been trying to suppress within himself for a long time. Sometimes Will resented Hannibal because every time Will fell back into that primal state, Hannibal seemed quite pleased. A real friend wouldn't be. A real friend would call him back from the void.

Will sighed. He shouldn't feel that way; he knew that. Hannibal was the first real friend Will had ever had. He could talk to him in a way that he'd never been able to talk to anyone. The sense of kinship was…staggering. And most of those interactions which felt like a kind of betrayal hadn't even been real. Will had been getting worse. Worse than he'd ever been, even when he was young and still adjusting to the way he saw the world. Trying to make it through; trying to seem normal and not see too much.

And seeing things…he'd thought seeing Hobbs had just been the stress of the situation. He'd thought he was getting better. After working at the Dolarhyde's for a while, he had been getting better. And now he was worse than ever before. Seeing the body that wasn't there, laid out in a way that had helped him understand Garrett Jacob Hobbs more than he wanted to–it was frightening, to say the least.

But Hannibal had been there to help him through it, and, it seemed, would continue to be there for him. Only the fact that he had Hannibal to help him through losing Abigail all over again made him able to get through the day with an approximation of a smile.

So when Hannibal came to him late in the day and asked him to leave his work and take a ramble in the woods with him, he agreed without even a mild protest.

The woods had a fairytale flavor to them. If Hannibal had been a woman, Will would have thought the soft, gorgeous character everything seemed to take on when Will talked to Hannibal meant that he was in love. Of course, Hannibal was a man, so it must have been some unique quality of light brought on by the time of year and the time of day.

Will felt vaguely guilty that he hadn't thought to bring his dogs; they would have loved a ramble. But because the master of the house was with him, Will didn't pay much attention to where they were going, which might be how they left the familiar paths behind and ended up in a corner of the estate Will had never explored before.

They came to a clearing with a small cabin. Standing beside the cabin–somehow–was a corpse standing upright, holding out his guts and viscera as if in an offering in one hand, and seeming to hold the rest of his organs in his belly with the other.

He walked closer. He knew it wasn't real. It couldn't be. So it was okay to touch it. The man's face, pale and waxy, was cool to the touch, but not yet frozen with rigor. His expression showed yearning, as if he was in love, and closer Will could see that among the intestines in his hand was a heart.

"He's in love. But not just love," Will murmured. "Yearning. He's been alone for so long. He thinks there's a chance now, for fellowship."

"What was that?" Hannibal asked.

Will looked up, blinking. "You don't. Do you. Do you see?"

"Do I see what, my dear boy?"

Will knew all along that the corpse wasn't there. He knew. But to hear Hannibal say it was devastating. He whimpered, feeling tears roll down his cheeks. "Why am I seeing these things?"

"Tell me what you see," Hannibal said.

"You don't w-w-want to know," Will said.

Hannibal's gentle touch to his back felt so comforting. "I do want to hear. Please tell me. What do you see, and how does it make you feel?"

"I see a man standing, lonely and…not desperate…but supplicant. Someone who has never felt the warmth of human companionship, willing to worship someone. Someone who proves worthy."

"And how does it make you feel?"

"I would do. I would do," Will felt his head swim. His heart was beating way too fast, and he was gasping like he'd run a mile. He felt…too hot. "I would do…anything to be worthy. I

would kill. Die. He could cut me open like this. I wish…I wish he would." Will felt his vision start to crowd over with black dots, and then he lost consciousness altogether.

When he came to, he was back at his little house, in bed.

Hannibal was sitting close by on a wicker chair he'd dragged into the bedroom from the sitting room. "How are you feeling?"

"What happened?" Will asked.

"You had a fit of vapors. I had to carry you back here. You're heavier than you look. I'm prepared to give you a diagnosis of melancholia," Hannibal said cheerfully.

"That sounds bad," Will said. He was vaguely embarrassed that he'd done something so feminine as pass out, and Hannibal had had to–horrors!–carry him.

"It's not. It's quite common. Perhaps more common with the upper classes."

Will laughed weakly. "Oh god. My illness is above my station, is it? I hope there's some cure?"

"No cure, I'm afraid, but I would be delighted to use all my arts and knowledge to treat you and bring you back to health," Hannibal said.

"Isn't that wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, wrong for you to treat me as an alienist when you. Well, when I consider you my dearest friend," Will said quietly.

Hannibal smiled and took Will's hand. Will clung to it tightly. "My dear boy. It can only be for the better if you trust me already. Don't I also treat Lord Dolarhyde? He's my friend as well, you know. I hope I can be objective in your treatment. But if there's anything that I can't do personally because of our relationship, I'll have my assistant help with it."

"Oh good," Will said. He paused. "I remember you saying something about your assistant before, but you've never introduced me to him."

"He's been away. Mr. Budge is an excellent practitioner, but not the most comfortable house guest. He only comes when I need him. With both you and Francis in need of my assistance, I believe I will have to send for him."

"Will I have to move into the house?"

"Not yet," Hannibal said. "Perhaps if there's a significant crisis."

"Significant crisis? Hannibal, I saw a dead man with his guts in his hand, offering me his heart. What's more significant than that?"

“Can you think of something that this vision might have represented for you?”

Will felt slightly disgruntled that Hannibal didn’t find it as shocking as he did, but then, it was comforting as well. “I don’t know.”

“Were you thinking of anything that worried you? Anything upsetting?”

“No,” Will said. “I was only thinking about how perfect the day was, and how beautiful the forest. How everything had this perfect complexion, and that if I’d been walking with a woman, I would have thought I was in love.”

Hannibal's expression was guarded. “Have you ever felt romantic love for a man before?”

“That’s not what I meant,” Will said hastily. “I didn’t mean to–I would never impose myself on you that way. I know you are far my superior in every respect, and a man besides. I mean…I’m crazy, but I’m not that crazy. I only meant that I felt a connection to you. I felt. I dunno. I felt happy to be with you.” He sighed. “Do you think I imagined that man as some kind of overture of friendship?”

“I think perhaps what you saw was your soul, reaching out to mine,” Hannibal said.

“How pathetic,” Will said under his breath.

“No, Will,” Hannibal said, getting up out of the chair and moving to sit beside Will on the bed. He ran his hands through Will’s hair tenderly, and gently caressed his face in a way that not anyone, not even a lover, had ever done before. “It’s anything but pathetic. I can’t imagine anything more beautiful than your soul. I would join with it in a heartbeat.”

Will frowned, not sure exactly what was happening. “I think you’re mixing your metaphors.”

“What I mean, Will, is that you’re very important to me. I consider you my dearest friend in all the world, and I will not hear of letting you leave this place until you’re well again. Perhaps not even then. I mean to keep you by my side for as long as you’ll let me. I’d love to show you things. The continent. The art–the music! I know you would appreciate the paintings of the martyrs, with your deep understanding of pain.”

Will felt his eyelids grow heavy. “Really?”

“Yes. You will be my true companion. The only one worthy to stand by my side,” Hannibal said. “I know you will prove yourself worthy.”

“How?” Will asked sleepily.

“Don’t worry about that now, dearest one. Just sleep,” Hannibal said. Will felt his hands caress and pet him, and then he knew nothing more.

When he woke again, it was full dark. The fireplace in his room was black, and there was only a sliver of a moon peeking through the window of the cottage. The window was open, for some reason. Will looked in the chair, but Hannibal was gone. He stood up to close the window and looked out.

He saw Abigail Hobbs, her face as white as a sheet, standing outside his window in his back garden. None of the dogs moved to bark at her.

“Abigail?” Will whispered. “Abigail is that you?”

Abigail looked at Will, her face a picture of terror and hope. “Daddy?” she whispered.

Will looked down at his hands and body. They looked right. The same. He hoped–he prayed–he was still himself. “I’m not…I’m not your father. I’m Will Graham.”

“Daddy, I need your help,” Abigail said.

“I’m here sweety,” Will found himself saying. That happened sometime. His affliction–his empathy–would sometimes make him say things other people wanted him to say if they wanted it hard enough. And Abigail seemed desperate.

“Don’t kill me daddy,” she whispered. “Not this time. Not again.”

She started to walk away, her movements strange but elegant. Will held up his hand. “No! Abigail! Stay here!”

Still she seemed to float away, her white dress blowing in the breeze. He ran to the door and wrenched it open, and ran to where she’d stood. He couldn’t see any footprints. No disturbed branches or leaves. It was like she’d never been there at all.

“I’m losing my mind,” Will said, trembling. He wished Hannibal was there, but at the same time, he wished he’d never met Hannibal at all. Hannibal seemed to care for him a great deal, and it was an awful burden to place on him, to be so sick.

But then Hannibal was a terribly capable man. Perhaps it was safe after all to lay such a burden at his feet.

# Chapter 11

Will isn't equal to going to work the next day. He isn't sure what to do to let the workers know how to proceed, but that question is answered for him when Hannibal shows up early that morning with a basket of beautiful pastries, steak and kidney pie, toasted nuts, fruit, boiled eggs and sliced meat. It's much more than a breakfast–he'll be able to pick away at the provided food all day, and perhaps part of the next.

"I didn't think you'd want to come to the main house for meals today," Hannibal said. "I am also happy to relay any orders you have to the men working on the kennel construction. And I understand completely if you would rather the work cease until you're feeling better."

"You always know what I need."

"I do my best to anticipate. I hope you will let me know if I ever miss my mark."

Will smiles indulgently. "I can't imagine that."

"It's happened, believe me," Hannibal says. "Especially when I first arrived on your shores, I made some faux pas based mostly on cultural misunderstandings."

"Did you make the pastries?"

"I did! Will you sit down and allow me to serve you?"

Will happily concedes. He's flattered and charmed at Hannibal's attentions, and the food is delicious, especially his favorite, steak and kidney pie. "I'm sure you must be regretting your decision to hire me. I know I'm much more trouble than I'm worth. And now…god, Hannibal, it's worse than you know."

"We will set aside for a moment your assumption that I find you any trouble at all, and address what happened to upset you since I saw you last," Hannibal said.

Then the entire tale of seeing Abigail spilled from Will like a torrent. Hannibal was sympathetic and kind, of course, but there was a note of concern behind his eyes that worried Will.

Will begged Hannibal to tell him what he thought.

"It is definitely concerning. In the past you had these episodes sporadically. This incident happened right after you saw the figure in the woods. That seems like a troublesome escalation. I hope that your condition will be much improved if you take the day to rest."

"Do you think I'll be able to take care of myself out here, or should I move to the big house?" Will asked.

"That's the second time you've asked me that. Are you worried about living on your own?"

“No,” Will said. “Not worried. I cherish this little place. I don’t want to move.”

“I’m very happy that you like it. And it is a very easy thing for me to check on you,” Hannibal said. “If it allows you to stay here where you’re happy, and all it costs me is a lovely walk through the pasture, I couldn’t think of a better solution.”

“Hannibal, you’re the lord of the manor. You can’t just. I can’t let you just waste all your time taking care of me. I should at least move closer so it’s more convenient for you.”

“I am, as you observed, the lord of the manor. And thus I am the one in charge of my own activities. I will not allow you or anyone to tell me what to do.”

“I didn’t mean to tell you what to do. But you have so many responsibilities. I should just abandon the project and allow you to hire someone more healthy to complete it. Perhaps the hospital where Abigail stayed would take me–”

“–Never!” Hannibal said, as close to shouting as Will had ever seen him. “Will Graham, you must promise me to never mention leaving again.”

He would hear nothing else until Will vowed that he would not leave the estate.

“Well, will you at least hire another person to oversee the project right now so that you don’t have to cancel your hunting party? They can use my plans and just make sure everything gets done on time. We have a very tight timeline already and I don’t want the construction to be mired down by my problems. I would hate for you to have to cancel an obligation to your guests because of me.”

Hannibal pulled his chair closer to Will’s and took his hand. “Will, I would be very happy if your project with the dogs lasted the rest of our lives. To have you here with me, to be able to talk with you, walk with you in the forest when we’re old and gray. That seems like a dream come true.”

“I know you consider me a friend, but Hannibal, you’ve done–you’re doing!–so much for me. It doesn’t seem like you’re getting anything out of this deal.”

“I’ve tried to avoid saying this, because I’m afraid you will feel some obligation to me. I wanted to ease you into the idea. But when I hear you talk about me getting something out of being with you–or leaving here like it would be a favor to me–I feel I have to let you know.”

“Let me know what?” Will asked. His biggest worry was that Hannibal was planning on writing a book about his condition. He wouldn’t be the first to want to do so, but the problem was that if Hannibal asked, he’d say yes, and he would hate to be so exposed. What if he became famous for his oddity, like the poor souls in freak shows? He couldn’t bear it–but he could never say no to Hannibal if he asked.

“Will, I adore you,” Hannibal said. Hannibal’s eyes burned with sincerity. “I want you here because I love you. I care deeply for you and want what’s best for you. I could not bear it if you left here for any other reason than if you truly wanted to go–if, for instance, some wonderful opportunity arose elsewhere, or if you felt unhappy here.”

“I don’t understand,” Will said. Hannibal couldn’t mean what it sounded like.

“I understand from what you’ve said that you care deeply for me as a friend and nothing more. I am not asking for you to in any way be more than friends with me–but also understand, my dearest, that I have never had a true friend. A true equal. Being your friend has been thrilling. The chief joy of my life. When I say you are my friend I’m saying something deep and abiding–more final and permanent than any love affair. Something that means more to me than you know.”

Hannibal began to blur, and Will brushed the tears from his eyes. “I feel the same way. I’ve never felt so close to anyone. I’ve never known myself the way I know myself when I’m with you.”

“Then please, let me take care of you. Let me guide you in the treatment I feel is best. Let me go out of my way to help you,” Hannibal said.

“I will.”

To Will’s delight, Hannibal had brought over two books for him to borrow. He insisted that Will should stay in and read–or at the very least, go no further outdoors than his garden, or a brief walk with his dogs. Will, he maintained, simply needed rest, and the visions of Abigail would fade like mist with the rising sun.

Will did not feel nearly as confident, but he allowed Hannibal to guide him.

That evening Hannibal came and checked on him. It seemed rather intimate, by candlelight, to greet Hannibal alone, now he knew his feelings.

But Will found it difficult to believe that Hannibal had truly meant that he adored him. That he loved him. It made no sense. Will was lowly, skinny, uneducated, poor. He was nothing. The only thing that distinguished him from his fellow man was a ‘gift’ that left him unsociable and awkward, and fit only for the company of animals.

Plus, these days he was losing his mind.

Hannibal, on the other hand, was dashing, handsome, and landed. Richer than anyone Will had ever met. Artistic and highly educated. He had beautiful manners and enchanting conversation.

He could even cook.

Hannibal was just…confused. Perhaps he was attracted to Will–oh, Will knew by now he had a pretty face–and if he just waited Hannibal out, he would stop this silliness about loving Will. When the attraction died of starvation, Hannibal and he could be comfortable friends. Perhaps they’d write letters to one another when Will moved on to his next job.

But when Will looked at Hannibal, sitting and reading across the room, he felt like he would die if he ever had to leave him. The thought of never having talks with Hannibal again. Never

being able to converse with someone on the same level. It felt like falling into a hole with no bottom–just a continuous sinking feeling of terror.

It would be cruel, though. To allow Hannibal to debase himself with someone as unworthy as Will. Hannibal would hate him for it eventually, he was sure. Resent that he had wasted so much time and energy on someone both hopeless and unimportant. Much better to simply remain friends, and allow Hannibal to treat his illness. He could complete the kennels when he was well.

At the end of the evening, Hannibal stood up. “Thank you for spending time with me. I’ve sent for my assistant. He’ll be arriving tomorrow. Once he’s settled in, perhaps the day after, we’ll resume sessions.”

“How exactly will your assistant be involved in our sessions?”

“He performs some of the medical treatments I feel you could benefit from. Bloodletting and purgatives. Some others. He’s been finding great success with using electricity to shock the brain into a calm state.”

“Those things don’t sound very restorative.”

“Nonsense. With the exception of the very slight electric shock, all of the treatments he provides are extremely common treatments used by the most compassionate alienists in England. I could bring you some very recent journal articles to peruse if you like. They explain the therapeutic principles involved much more thoroughly than I can here and now.”

“I don’t know. Even if all the doctors are doing it, It sounds like torture,” Will said.

“I wouldn’t recommend a treatment for you that I didn’t believe would be beneficial.”

“No, I know,” Will said. He paused, and Hannibal waited for him to continue. “But if it’s going to hurt–if I’m going to be weak, and vulnerable–I’d rather be with you than some stranger. I know he must be very good at what he does if you employ him, but I couldn’t bear it. Not unless you were with me.”

Hannibal smiles. “It shall be so. Mr. Budge will work primarily with Sir Dolarhyde. You will have some interactions with Mr. Budge, of course, but not any treatments you’d rather receive from me.”

Will felt reassured.

He was frightened that he would see Abigail that night; so frightened that he stayed up late. For some reason the spirit left him alone. Perhaps Hannibal had been right, and he’d only needed rest. Perhaps if he followed Hannibal’s regimen, he would be restored to sanity.

It wouldn’t make him any more worthy of Hannibal’s affections, but at least it would make him less of a burden to his friend.

# Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

> Will doesn’t have encephalitis in this fic. From what I gathered from some mild research into encephalitis, it would have been possible to survive it at that time period, but kind of improbable, and at a great permanent cost to his overall health. So Hannibal is changing Will simply through unhinged Victorian psychiatric treatments, drugs, gaslighting, and therapy here. I mean he didn't need the edge of encephalitis with his other patients, right?

Will was grateful for his instinct to beg Hannibal to take care of his therapeutic treatments personally. When Will met Tobias Budge, he met a curious blankness. Hannibal was extremely hard for Will to read, but in a way that Will found soothing. Tobias, on the other hand, seemed to be entirely hollow–that is, until he began to hate Will.

Will didn’t know why Tobias hated him at first. He knew that Tobias’ face held mild offense when Hannibal told him that he would not be treating Will, only Sir Dolarhyde. Will couldn’t imagine why Tobias should care–Will was no one, after all, and Sir Dolarhyde was a rather important man. Eventually he realized what it was. Tobias liked hurting people, and it affronted him that he would not be allowed to hurt Will.

As for the treatments Hannibal subjected Will to, they were not as torturous as Will had feared, but they didn’t seem to make him any better, either. In fact, they might have him worse. He felt weak, feverish, and anxiety-ridden. Will knew tha t his health would be much worse without Hannibal’s treatments, but he wished he could do something to speed things up.

The kennel project was suffering, which only increased Will’s anxiety. Hannibal had given him a decoction to take to calm himself whenever he worried too much–and that had helped, even if it had lent a slight atmosphere of unreality to life. But altogether Will was fretful and weak, and impatient to get better.

“Give it time, my dear,” Hannibal would say. “No treatment can work immediately.”

Will was starting to have his doubts. He wondered, in fact, if he might feel better if he left the estate and went to the seaside. He’d heard wonderful things about the therapeutic effects of such a journey. Hannibal was even willing to take him, but he couldn’t go at the moment because of his simultaneous treatment of Sir Dolarhyde.

Will didn’t tell Hannibal about his insights about Tobias Budge; he knew Hannibal and Tobias were close, and he’d tried to get people who were being taken advantage of to see the

truth before. It had never worked out. They just blamed Will–even if Will's insights did force them to see the truth. It was better not to speak up at all.

All he could really do was avoid Tobias. This was actually fairly easy to do, considering Will wasn't being treated by him, and Will mainly ate delicious food deliveries to his cottage from Hannibal himself.

But Tobias seemed determined to seek him out. He always seemed to be where Will was, watching him. Glaring. One day, while Will was walking in the grand gardens of the estate, Tobias seemed to materialize out of the hedges.

"I know your kind," Tobias said.

"What?" Will asked, caught off guard.

"You're here, malingering, feigning illness and taking advantage of the master of the house. His generosity and his kindness. You're using this so-called gift of yours to control him."

"No I'm not," Will said stupidly.

"You know he wants a companion. You know he's never connected to anyone, really connected in his life. And as much as I tried to be the person who could do that, as much as it should have been me for reasons you can't begin to understand, it could never be more than an intellectual exercise. We could no more truly connect than two islands in an archipelago. But you could do it with that magical brain he's told me about."

"I can't help what my brain's like."

"It's a lie. You're a charlatan," Tobias said.

"I wish I was lying," Will said. He laughed. "I would have given anything to be normal, all of these years."

"Oh yes," Tobias said scornfully. "I'm very sympathetic. I would hate to have a condition that made me fascinating to a powerful man like Hannibal. Well, he'll find out the truth about you soon enough."

Will smiled. "Are you going to tell him?"

Tobias paused. "I can't tell if you're playing stupid or if you're really, actually very stupid."

Will shrugged and walked away.

Whatever Tobias had planned to do, it didn't seem to work, because Hannibal continued his extreme solicitousness to Will, and the shadows on Tobias' face grew darker.

Will tried to ignore it. After all, he had his own health to consider, and now that it was full summer, he was feeling fretful and warm, on top of everything else.

When he complained to Hannibal, his friend smiled. “Why don’t you join me at the swimming hole?”

“I didn’t know there was a swimming hole,” Will said. He bathed in the stream by his cottage, but it was a little shallow for an actual swim.

“If you follow the stream by your cottage for nearly a mile, it widens into a deep pond with a lovely sandy bottom. I could join you, if you were interested.”

“Of course I’m interested! But I’m afraid I don’t have a bathing costume.”

Hannibal laughed. “The English and their bathing costumes. We’re both men. Let’s simply swim naked.”

Will agreed. Though it was fairly standard for young boys to swim naked, it was rather funny to think of two grown men bathing naked together–but Will had to remember that Hannibal came from Europe, where apparently saunas were all the rage. It was perfectly natural–the natural state, as it were–for men to be naked together.

They brought the dogs, a picnic, which Hannibal would not hear of Will carrying, and a blanket to stretch out on. It sounded like the kind of day Will had imagined country boys having, back when he was a boy and dreaming about what it would be like to be away from the grime and the smoke of the city.

Hannibal laid out the blanket but left the food in the basket in the shade. “We should swim to develop our appetite. Nothing tastes better than food after a swim.”

Will could swim. His father had been a seaman and-though many seamen spend their lives on ships and have no idea how to swim–held the firm belief that everyone should be able to hold themselves aloft when the water was over their head. Will had swam enough as a boy to learn the skill, but not enough to form opinions about how food tasted afterwards. Swimming hadn’t been a frequent activity, even though he lived near a boatyard. The Thames was filled with sewage, and hardly pleasant. He’d only swum in the ocean on very infrequent holidays to Brighton.

They disrobed completely and got in the water. Hannibal walked into his knees and then dived gracefully, and Will went more slowly and cautiously, only going underwater when the water hit his shoulders.

“You swim quite well for a man of your background,” Hannibal said.

“My father taught me.”

Will didn’t say it, but his father had failed to teach him to enjoy swimming–but he was learning to do that today. They luxuriated in the water, and Will felt comfortable for the first time in days. He learned the knack of holding air in his lungs just a bit longer to make himself more buoyant, and diving below the surface just for fun. He was so unburdened for the first time in weeks–so uncomplicatedly joyous–that when Hannibal swam by him, he kissed him.

It was just an innocent peck on the mouth. He'd kissed his mother and father the same way as a boy. But the effect on Hannibal was startling.

His eyes went avid, and examined Will's face closely. Whatever he saw, it made him grab hold of Will and kiss him thoroughly.

Will had never been kissed like that before. He'd never felt like this about a man, and the women he'd cared for had all been good girls who were more filled with a fear of getting with child than passion for him, and so he'd never had sex with anyone. He'd never been kissed, therefore, with intention. A kiss to seduce. A kiss that was aiming to lead somewhere.

Will's lips were aflame, and he allowed the passionate kiss. When Hannibal's tongue swept his lips, he opened his mouth. Hannibal's tongue plunged inside, and Will groaned with arousal.

Will pushed Hannibal away, and he obliged, but he didn't seem happy about it.

"What's wrong?" Hannibal said, panting.

"We shouldn't," Will said. "You should be with someone more suitable. A woman who can give you heirs. Or at least someone from your station. An intellectual. Someone on your level. You'll get sick of me and I couldn't bear that. Not if I knew what it was like to really be with you."

Hannibal frowned. "Will, my love, my life. I could never become sick of you. And you could never lose me. I swear to you my darling I will never let you go. I think neither of us would survive the separation."

"I wouldn't," Will said. He swam closer to Hannibal and kissed him again.

Hannibal kissed him back, and then his hands started to wander, and Will remembered they were both naked.

Will laughed against Hannibal's mouth and they separated long enough for Will to say. "I didn't mean to kiss you for the first time when we were naked. So brazen."

"It's wonderfully convenient," Hannibal said, a smile in his voice. He kissed Will's neck, and his hands reached down and found Will's very hard cock. "Can I make you come?"

"Yes," Will gasped.

Hannibal pulled Will closer still until their cocks were touching, and pushed them together as they kissed. They moved together with ancient rhythms until they came, Will's legs wrapped around Hannibal's waist.

"You're wonderful, Will," Hannibal breathed into Will's neck.

"How did you stay afloat during all that?" Will asked.

Hannibal laughed. “I’m standing, darling.”

They got out of the water eventually, dried off, and ate. Food really did taste better after a swim, or maybe that was the happiness. They couldn’t stop kissing and touching, and Will wasn’t sure what to do with the immensity of the feelings inside of him.

They went back to Will’s cottage well before dinner, because Hannibal was cooking for his guests. Hannibal left Will at the door of his cottage with a kiss.

Will felt like he was floating on air. He put the picnic basket down on the table to look for something to nibble on while he finished reading one of the books he’d borrowed from Hannibal while there was still light, when he heard a noise.

Tobias Budge was standing in the darkened corner, looking at him.

Will made an effort not to show his alarm. “What are you doing here?”

“I saw the two of you,” Tobias said.

“What?”

“I saw Hannibal kiss you goodbye,” Tobias smiled–or the expression on his face was what Will supposed passed for a smile, for him. “I came here for another purpose, but now that’s unnecessary. Because you’re going to pack your things and leave. You’re not going to say goodbye or leave a forwarding address, and you’re going to find another line of work.”

“Am I?” Will asked.

“Yes. You are. Because if you don’t, I’ll tell the magistrate and Hannibal’s houseguests, and anyone else I can find, that the two of you are perverts who need to go to prison.”

“I thought you cared about Hannibal.”

“I did. Before he proved himself to be such a fool as to fall for you. To kiss you. Be seduced by you. I thought he was above all that. I thought he was–well, he wasn’t what I thought he was. He’s simply a randy fool prepared to risk his freedom for a tumble in the hay with a nobody like you. He’s worthless. An idiot in a fancy suit.”

“Hannibal is miles above both of us, but he’s especially superior to you,” Will said.

Tobias crossed his arms. “I’m sure he shares your opinion. But he’ll realize what a fool he was to fall for you when you leave him.”

“And you’ll comfort him, I suppose.”

“I have no interest in him like that,” Tobias said. “We’d simply get back to the work. It’s important. You’re a distraction. Or you were.”

Will looked around at his comfortable cottage. Could he really leave all this? Could he leave his business building dog kennels? Well, he had to, didn’t he?

Could he leave Hannibal, without even saying goodbye?

Rage started to build in Will's breast. How dare this man try to take Hannibal away from him.

How fucking dare he.

# Chapter 13

Hannibal waited to serve dinner as long as he could, and then had to proceed without Tobias. When, an hour after dinner, Tobias had not returned to the house, Hannibal went directly to Will's cottage.

He had noticed Tobias' animosity toward Will, but he wasn't worried that Tobias would do anything to hurt Will. Tobias was an extremely controlled man, who was very much a creature of habit. His kills were ritualized, but every part of the ritual was a separate strategy to prevent his capture. He never killed anyone he knew; there were enough transients on the road to keep any killer who simply wanted materials to restring his bow very happy.

Hannibal was worried, somehow, that now that he'd been with Will–had shared kisses and touches he never thought he'd be able to share with his beloved–he would lose him. Tobias would say something to Will to show him Hannibal's true nature, or he'd find a way to send Will away. He would kill Tobias without a second thought for such a thing, but he was sure Tobias would never guess he felt strongly about Will (since Tobias was incapable of strong feelings himself), and wouldn't care about hurting Hannibal anyway.

When he got to the cabin, the windows were dark. There was no fire lit–not unusual in this heat–but there were no candles or lamps burning, either. Hannibal knocked on the door as he opened it, trying to illuminate the room in front of him with the lantern he'd brought.

"Will? Hello? Are you there?"

The metallic smell of blood filled Hannibal's nostrils. For the first time in years, he felt fear. Not for himself, but for his young, beautiful friend.

"Will? Please, show yourself," he said, shocked to hear his own voice shake for the first time since he was a child.

"Don't. Don't come in." It was Will's voice. It sounded broken and hoarse, like a prisoner who hasn't spoken to a soul in weeks.

Hannibal moved further into the room, holding the light aloft. Will was sitting on the floor, covered in blood. Tobias was a mess of pulp and blood. Hannibal could tell, even from the distance away he was standing and through the dim light, that Tobias was dead.

"Darling," Hannibal said. He was fairly certain his voice sounded awed–pleased. But Will was too caught up in self-censure and guilt to hear that.

"He saw you kiss me. He was waiting to speak to me and he saw you kiss me goodbye. He told me that he would tell anyone who would listen that we were perverts and, I don't know what it's like where you come from, but here you can go to jail just for kissing another man. But really what he wanted was to blackmail me into leaving you. I just couldn't. I couldn't leave you without saying goodbye. I could have left the estate and my profession. But you? After I just found you? It was too unfair."

“So you killed him.”

“No!” Will cried, his voice anguished. “I didn’t just kill him. I struck out. I fought with him.”

“He was an extremely proficient fighter. You must have fought well.”

“He wouldn’t stop. I was just angry, but he wouldn’t stop. I had to keep fighting or he would have killed me. You have to believe me. He would have killed me. I was just defending myself.”

Hannibal didn’t care either way; the fact that Will had killed him was excellent news regardless. But he examined the evidence through Jack Crawford’s eyes. There was a garrotte near Tobias’ hand, and Will had a cut from the wire on the palm of his hand. Hannibal could see that Tobias must have tried to strangle him, but he put his hand up. But Jack Crawford might interpret the evidence as Will beating him to death, then holding a garrotte around his hand to pretend at defensive wounds and then placing it near the body. Tobias was beaten far past any sane concept of self-defense. No one would ever believe Will’s story, save perhaps someone who knew Tobias well.

But Hannibal was the only person who knew Tobias well, and it wouldn’t serve his purposes to stand up in court and admit that one of his closest associates was known to kill people with a garrotte.

There was only one thing to do.

“My darling, you must take off all your clothes and go wash in the stream. We can replace what you’re wearing and call it a gift from me. It might be unusual, but everyone knows how friendly we are and what a clothes horse I am. I’m happy to play the role of the eccentric foreigner. Start now.”

When Hannibal saw that Will was doing as he said without argument, he headed back to the main house. He sent a servant to get Chiyoh, and to ask her to come alone to Will’s cabin. When he returned to Will, he was standing, wet, naked and shivering in the cabin.

He found a towel and wiped Will dry, then helped him to get into his sleeping clothes. When Chiyoh arrived, he was tenderly bandaging Will’s knuckles, which were bloody from his battle.

“I knew something like this would happen to Tobias eventually. He raised my hackles. A snake is still a snake even if you invite it into your house,” she said.

This was uncharacteristically chatty of her, and Hannibal sensed she was relieved to see Tobias out of their lives. In a way he was, too. Tobias had only been in his life because he had followed Hannibal one day while he killed someone, and then blackmailed him to become his associate. He could have killed Tobias for that–he’d considered it, of course–but at the time the man had amused him.

“I’m sorry,” Will said, his voice trembling. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

Hannibal wiped them away. “I know you are, my darling. But this looks very bad. We can’t defend your actions in court. We all knew the kind of eerie fellow Tobias was–none of us are surprised to see a deadly weapon like a garrotte on him. But someone who didn’t know him would think you were simply trying to manufacture a defense. You beat him so badly that it would be impossible to simply call it self-defense.”

“He wouldn’t stop. I just wanted him to stop.”

“I know, my love.” Hannibal turned to Chiyoh. “Can you handle his body on your own?”

“I came here on my horse. I can carry the body if you put it across the saddle for me,” she said.

“No, no!” Will cried. “You can’t put yourself at risk like this. I did something awful. I must pay the price.”

Hannibal ignored him. He was thinking if he could possibly move the body without messing up his clothes. He considered taking everything off before he picked the body up, but thought his outfit was likely ruined from touching Will so much when he’d been covered in blood anyway. However, he did have to get through the house to his bedroom, and be undressed by his valet. He could explain away a few drops of blood here and there, but whatever might transfer from the grim mess on the floor? He started to disrobe.

He picked up the body and put it on the horse.

“I like him,” Chiyoh said, then she mounted behind him. “He seems to have a conscience. That should be interesting for you.”

Hannibal ignored this ribbing. “Thank you, my dear. You’re always such a help to me.”

“That is my aim,” she said. She turned the horse towards the woods and disappeared among the trees.

Hannibal went to the stream and cleaned away the blood, then went back into the cottage and put his clothes on.

Will sat on his bed, looking quite lost.

“How are you feeling, my darling?”

“How can you call me that?” Will asked. “I thought I was unworthy of you before, but now I’ve only proven it. The first day I kissed you, I exposed you to blackmail. And then I killed the man who blackmailed us. What if the murder is exposed? It could ruin you. You must see that being with me is too great a risk. I’ll ruin you. Destroy what you hold dear.”

“My love. My life. You are what I hold dear,” Hannibal said. He put an arm around Will’s shoulders, and Will snuggled closer.

“You should take this as a sign. I never would have done that before you. The way I feel about you doesn’t make me stable. It isn’t healthy. It’s too strong. Too passionate. It’s not

sustainable."

"Perhaps our feelings for one another will lead to our destruction. But I could never let you go. I could never be parted. If I die of love for you, it will be an honorable death, and I will die the luckiest man on earth."

Will's eyes narrowed. "You're much less sane than you appear, aren't you?"

"Does that worry you, my love?"

Will sighed. "Not really. It explains some things, I suppose. Why you would be drawn to abnormal alienism. Why you could love me even though I'm losing my mind."

"I love you because you're perfect, my darling. Now, you go to sleep. You're going to tell anyone who asks that you spent the evening reading and went to bed early."

Will opens the covers and gets in the bed, pulling the covers up to his chin. "But you must have had a servant bring your relative here."

"That's correct. We will say that I came to check on you, and found you had a high fever and I needed to consult Chiyoh."

"What will you say about Tobias?"

"Simply that he left the estate earlier in the day. Who knows how long he was in your cottage waiting for you? He comes and goes as he pleases. Perhaps I will have Chiyoh post a letter asking for me to send his trunk to him in a few weeks."

"You should hide a small bag and some clothes. His essential overnight things. In case."

"You're right, my love. I'll do that when I go back to the main house."

"Thank you for helping me," Will said. "I was worried the dogs would make a mess so I put them outside."

Hannibal told Will he would see to the dogs, and then kissed Will tenderly and left the cottage. He found the dogs in the backyard. There was blood on some of their feet, but none of them had rolled in the puddle. They would have to be washed thoroughly tomorrow, but for now, Hannibal took them to the stream and encouraged them to swim around. They looked at him like he was mad, but chased sticks as he bid, then returned to the backyard. It was still unusually hot out, so he didn't worry about their well-being being wet and outside.

Then, the real work began. Hannibal liked cleaning and had decided habits about what products worked best, and he stocked them in all of his dwellings. Therefore he disrobed once again, got a bucket of water from the stream, and attacked the bloodstain on the floor. It would be useless to try to find every blood splatter in the dark, but if someone happened to stop by, they should not find a huge stain on the floor.

The stain was, indeed, a stain, and probably the boards needed to be replaced. A more permanent wood treatment would be desirable–lacquer, for instance, would have repelled the

blood. He'd been short sighted, but it had been a symptom of his excitement to get Will's cottage finished for him.

Thankfully Will could do the board replacement himself–he was much handier than Hannibal–and then Hannibal could hire workers to lacquer the floor to prevent future stains. Will even had a reason to be home and could simply take building materials from the construction site without issue.

Altogether, Will had proven himself quite capable, even intelligent under duress. Hannibal was pleased. Will hadn't quite accepted his dark impulses, but there was still time. At least Hannibal was now completely sure Will's dark impulses were really there. And now Will knew he was capable of murder, it would be easier to influence him in that direction.

Hannibal had no intention of letting Will go, so he had a lifetime to prove himself worthy of Hannibal's regard.

# Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Hannibal came to Will's cabin the next morning, Will was scrubbing the blood splatter off of the furniture.

"How is it coming?" Hannibal asked.

"The blood is coming off the wooden furniture, but the seat of this chair is ruined."

"Take the seat cushion right off. I can have it replaced. I know you might be offended on behalf of your dogs, but it's likely easiest to say one of them peed on it."

Will laughed, the sound just on the edge of hysteria. "I saw you moved the rag carpet in here. I'm not happy with the stain underneath–although you did a good job of cleaning it."

"You'll have to replace the boards. I think you can find some suitable materials at the kennel site overnight."

Will nodded, his face tight. "I'm so sorry you've had to lower yourself to this. To cleaning up blood after I killed someone. You're so wonderful–so clean. I feel like I've dragged you into my world. Down to my level."

"I got here on my own. Believe me, Will, my life has not always been as rarified as it is now. There are things in my past–in my childhood–that would shock you, even now," Hannibal said.

Will's eyes went unfocused. "The girl. Your sister. She was murdered. Not by you, but you saw far too much of what happened to her. That's what broke you. Made you less than sane."

"If you wanted to, you could use that gift of yours to pretend to be psychic. If you and Freddie Lounds teamed up, you could probably gain even the approval of the queen herself."

"That's what Tobias accused me of. Or actually, he accused me of not having my affliction at all. Of just pretending to be able to empathize with everyone. Which didn't even make sense because even if you were pretending to empathize but you got it right that would mean you were actually empathizing."

"Tobias didn't really understand empathy in the first place. He, I think, had trouble even imagining what it would be like to have feelings. I tried to help him be a productive member of society in spite of this, but people must follow their nature."

"He was your patient?"

"Never officially. I think he saw me as a mentor, at times."

“He did not want to let you go. He thought that my influence on you would destroy you. I can’t help but think he was right.”

Hannibal offered Will a hand and pulled him up to standing, then brushed the hair out of his eyes. “We’ve been over this. If your love destroys me, I’ll smile at the memory of our first kiss, our wonderful courtship, and the many hours I spent conversing with you, as a wonderful way to die.”

“You’re insane,” Will said fondly.

“Yes,” Hannibal agreed. “Love is a form of glorious madness.”

Will moved closer and Hannibal was tempted to waste away the rest of the morning making love to his darling Will–but it was unwise. Foolish to make love to him in full daylight when he was expected back at the house. He had to get back to Francis.

He traded kisses with Will back and forth for half an hour before he could persuade himself to get back to his duties.

Francis was waiting for him in his study. His body was taut–rife with tension. Hannibal frowned. “How are we today, Francis?”

“We? We? Are you mocking us, doctor?” Francis said. His voice was deep and otherworldly.

“Who am I speaking to?” Hannibal asked.

“Put some respect in your tone,” Francis growled. “You’re addressing the Great. Red. Dragon!”

Part of Hannibal was pleased to hear this fully developed personae coming out of the mouth of the huge but meek man. He couldn’t hope for a better result from the therapy. But at the same time it was dashed inconvenient that it was happening right now.

“You’ve made progress since I saw you last. How did you achieve this transformation?”

“Tobias and I talked. He helped me see that there was only one way to become what I needed to become.”

“Which was?”

The Great Red Dragon smiled eerily. “Those perfect families in your village. I changed them.”

Hannibal blinked. He had developed rather a habit of killing people who stayed in his guest cabins–the ones no one was aware of but himself and Chiyoh. But he would never kill anyone from the nearby village. It was nothing to do with loyalty, of course. It was simply too suspicious that villagers might frequently go missing.

“How many?”

“No sacrifice is too great on the path to becoming.”

“Normally I would agree, but it’s foolish to hunt so close to where you live.”

“You dare to call me foolish!”

Hannibal managed to suppress a sigh. As impressive as the Dragon was, it was a bit tiresome talking to him. “What does the Great Red Dragon require of me?”

“I need to change someone. Someone strong. Someone who has killed before. I need to change Tobias Budge.”

“You’re too late,” Hannibal said. “Someone has already killed him.”

The sound of rage the Great Red Dragon made was unlike anything Hannibal had ever heard. When a servant opened the door–against orders–Hannibal grabbed a syringe off his desk and jabbed it in Francis’ neck.

He was such a big man that it was almost tricky for Hannibal to ensure he fell to the floor safely. He looked up at the servant who had distracted Francis. “Gather several others. You will be transferring him to his room.”

“I know I wasn’t supposed to open the door,” the servant said.

“Since I suspect you saved my life, I’ll forgive you this once,” Hannibal said. He smiled, but he would have rather taken care of the Great Red Dragon then and there. If he had attacked Hannibal, it would have been a clear case of self defense. To be fair, Hannibal winning that fight wasn’t exactly a forgone conclusion. The Great Red Dragon was mythical–huge–and mad as a hatter. Who knew how that contest would end?

But what a way to go.

For the first time, the thought of dying in an epic fight brought Hannibal disquiet. It was because of Will, he knew. For the first time since childhood, the thought of a long life seemed desirable. To have a companion. An equal. It made the banality of daily life tolerable.

Right now, though, Hannibal had to decide what to do with the Great Red Dragon. The only thing to do was to consult Francis’ wife. He had to, after the spectacle Francis had made of himself.

Hannibal found Reba in the private sitting room she and her husband shared in the guest suite. He explained the situation as best he could–omitting the murder confession–and asked what Reba would prefer he do.

“I want you to treat him,” she said.

“I’m not sure I can,” Hannibal said. “Your husband is a big man, and from what I can see, quite unstable–potentially violent. My assistant has been called away, apparently. Alone, with just my servants, I’m not sure I can handle him should things go bad.”

“He made me promise I wouldn’t ever put him in one of those places. He likes you, and he likes it here. Perhaps Will could be induced to help.”

Hannibal smiled. “Perhaps you’re right. It might be just the thing–to get Will over his own angst by helping a friend with his.”

A knock sounded on the door, and Reba said, “Come.”

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Count Lecter, but Mr. Crawford is in the drawing room.”

It was almost enough to make Hannibal flustered. He sighed audibly. “When it rains it pours. I’m so sorry, Lady Dolarhyde, I’m going to have to leave you. If you’re sure about your husband’s treatment, we may have to keep him sedated for a short while.”

“I trust you, Hannibal.”

Hannibal thanked her and left the room. He adjusted his coat and hair in the mirror, then walked down to the drawing room.

“Hello my friend,” Hannibal said.

“Wonderful to see you,” Jack said.

He stood and held out his hand and Hannibal shook it hardily.

“What brings you to my humble home?”

“I’ll grant you that this is your home, but I must insist that you and humble are not well acquainted, and for good reason.”

Hannibal laughed. “Thank you. I hope you’ll have time to join us for dinner.”

“Perhaps. Really I have some questions to ask you and your servants, if you can spare them.”

“Oh?”

“There have been some disappearances in the village. I’m sure you’ve heard.”

“Disappearances? No, I’m afraid I hadn’t heard. I’m unusually busy just now. I have two house guests who have taken a turn for the worst and have entrusted their mental wellbeing to my care. I’ve never taken on quite so much at one time, and I’m rather behind in the local happenings. Perhaps you could fill me in?”

Jack filled him in. There were three families who had lived on farms on the outskirts of town. All the mirrors in the houses had been broken, and the families themselves were gone.

Hannibal was mystified as to where the Great Red Dragon would have put them. When he had said he’d changed them, it had sounded like they were dead, but where would he have put the bodies? Was there any place in the area that a visitor like Francis would know about where almost twenty bodies could be concealed? And when those families were found, dead,

with their bodies almost certainly mangled, it would be a great scandal. Hannibal would have trouble treating any future patients at his home.

Of course, if he and Will were forced to take violent action against the Dragon, no one would question his death, knowing he'd killed all those innocent people.

And it would be no great tragedy to rent an office in London, he supposed. He was confident he could persuade Will to join him in London as a houseguest should the occasion arise.

Life, Hannibal thought, had been becoming too easy. He should appreciate this rash of challenges.

He tried to remind himself of that thought later in the evening when he saw Jack talking to Will at dinner.

Will hadn't been up to coming to dinner lately, but he seemed much improved. It was almost as if–and Hannibal wasn't the least bit surprised by this–Will was feeling better after killing Tobias. Perhaps the memory of that moment of clarity–the purity of a life and death struggle–had shown him that his fretting was doing him no good.

Hannibal was happy to see Will's progress, but it was a little nerve-inducing to see him and Jack Crawford becoming acquainted.

"Jack wants me to try to use my empathy to see if I can tell where the people who disappeared went," Will told him as Hannibal walked him back to his cottage.

Hannibal, for once, had no idea how to feel about this. "How would that even work? You get inside people's feelings, not track missing people."

Will shrugged, and there was something dishonest in his shrug. Hannibal could sense that he had an inkling of how he could help Jack; that perhaps he'd intuited what happened in a crime before. This intrigued Hannibal. His heart fairly fluttered. He could never predict his darling Will–he was a constant surprise.

Jack was not, at the moment, investigating any of Hannibal's crimes, but he had in the past. What if he told Will some of the facts of those old cases? Would Will intuit what had happened? Would he tell Jack what he knew? Would he stop loving Hannibal?

Hannibal felt strangely worried, and yet, more excited than he'd been in years.

He could never thank his horrible friends enough for introducing him to Will. It was rather unforgivable that his happiness and torment had sprung from such a banal source, but it couldn't be helped.

Chapter End Notes

I can't stop throwing obstacles at Hannibal. I enjoy tormenting him.

# Chapter 15

Will, of course, was happy to help Hannibal with Sir Dolarhyde. He did admit to worrying about the progress of the kennel, but Hannibal was quick to reassure him that he fervently hoped the kennels would never be finished, necessitating Will moving into the estate permanently.

Nevertheless, Will had agreed to look at the crime scene for Jack, so he wasn't able to help Hannibal with Francis until the afternoon.

That suited Hannibal. He had time to prepare Francis for what was to come.

This was an easy process. He simply dropped some subtle hints to the Great Red Dragon that, while he wasn't sure exactly who had killed Tobias Budge, Budge had a problem with Will Graham.

The Great Red Dragon's eyes narrowed. "I remember Tobias mentioning this. Will Graham. The nervous little man who everyone but Freddie Lounds thinks is wonderful. What did he have against Will Graham?"

Hannibal walked closer. The Great Dragon was strapped, with sturdy leather bindings, to a bed in a room in the staff quarters. The staff quarters were simply the only place in the house that had few decorations and things the Dragon could use as a weapon if he happened to get free. Plus, no one would be disturbed there. The servants were far too busy to come to their rooms in the day, and Hannibal kept him drugged at night.

"Tobias had trouble connecting with people. He thought I was his best shot," Hannibal said.

"And you rejected that. You prefer Will Graham. Because you have trouble connecting to people, too. And he makes it easy. He can just do that wonderful little magic trick and see life through your eyes," the Great Dragon said. His voice had been filled with wonderment at the beginning, but by the end of his speech it was tainted with scorn. He, like Tobias Budge, was upset at the idea that true connection would be impossible for him.

"Would you begrudge me a meeting of minds like the one you have with your wife?" Hannibal asked.

"She can't truly understand. Not me. She understands Francis well enough, not that that's difficult. Her mortal sensibilities cannot comprehend the complexity of the Great Red Dragon."

Hannibal resisted the urge to comment that he should branch out and read some other poets besides Blake. He just waited for the Great Red Dragon to come to his own conclusion.

"Why is it so hard for you to find a connection? Why did Tobias Budge want to connect with you, of all people? Why weren't you scared away when I told you I changed all those people?"

Hannibal moved around the room, tidying up. “Why do you think?”

“I think you’ve changed people. You’ve become. You’re not like these other people. You’re a predator among prey, like us.”

Hannibal didn’t agree or disagree, but left the room, happy enough with the result. Eventually, the Great Red Dragon would come to kill him and Will. Hopefully they would survive the encounter.

Hannibal waited for Jack and Will’s return, but they were later than expected, so he went to check on Abigail.

She looked predictably nervous. “Will Graham is my friend, you know? He helped me with my father. He protected me. You’re having me terrorize him. Every time I see him he looks worse than the time before.”

“Were you so afraid of your father?” Hannibal asked, his voice filled with simple curiosity. He didn’t mention the fact that he hadn’t had Abigail appear to Will since he’d killed Tobias Budge.

Her eyes filled with tears. “I should have been,” she whispered. “I should have been but I loved him. And he was a good hunter.”

To distract her from her worries, Hannibal told her about Francis Dolarhyde and his transformation into the Great Red Dragon. She listened avidly, as rapt as a child hearing a fairy tale. And why not? The Great Red Dragon was proof that she could transcend her current stressful situation. Of course she would be interested.

Finally, Will returned from his work with Jack. They were too late for formal dinner–even though formal dinner had been a rather informal affair, considering it had just been Hannibal and Reba eating. He would have invited the local vicar, but assumed he would be busy with his flock after the death of three families. Hannibal set out some plates he’d saved for Jack and Will.

“I’m very sorry these dishes aren’t at their best,” Hannibal fretted.

“I’m sure it’s wonderful,” Jack said.

Will was too busy eating to reassure Hannibal.

“Did you find something?” Hannibal asked.

“Will is a marvel,” Jack said. “He was able to read the crime scene like it was a letter in words from the killer himself. And he found the families.”

Hannibal raised an eyebrow. “They were alright?”

Jack sighed. “No. I’m afraid they weren’t. Their bodies had been transported to an old mill that was no longer in use, and arranged in the most perverse fashion. Actually, none of the bodies have been touched, yet. I’d like it if you could preserve the scene in a drawing.

Perhaps several drawings. I know the precise nature of your artistic talent. My words describing the scene will simply not make the impression a picture would."

"I would be happy to help. But I don't know if that's the best use of my time. Surely the townsfolk will need reassurance. Guidance," Hannibal said.

Will cleared his throat. "Hannibal, if I may. I wouldn't suggest you go in and talk to the people right now. They're…well, they blame you for what happened."

Hannibal put a hand on his heart. "They think I killed these people?"

"No, of course not!" Will said. "They think that your interest in alienism and the fact that you invite people like me and Sir Dolarhyde who need help has left them vulnerable to the mad and dangerous."

Hannibal had no defense, as this had been exactly what happened. He didn't want to admit as much to Jack, because Jack would likely take the Great Red Dragon away and Hannibal and Will would have no chance to fight him. But it couldn't be helped. Everything had been a disaster for the last few days, and he couldn't simply stay silent. If they had had this conversation over dinner or if Reba was in the room, he would have had the excuse to stay silent for her sake.

"Do you think it's possible that poor Francis is responsible for what happened? Could the townsfolk be right?"

They sent for Reba and Jack interrogated her to find out if the dates when the families went missing corresponded with the dates Sir Dolarhyde had been indisposed or had gone out "walking". They were all suitably alarmed to find out that they did. But, there was the small fact that Tobias Budge had also been at the estate the whole time, and no one had died or gone missing before his arrival.

This all seemed very mysterious to everyone but Hannibal, who knew that Tobias had encouraged the Great Red Dragon's reckless behavior, likely to annoy Hannibal.

"Where did Mr. Budge go?" Jacked asked.

"I'm not certain. He took a small bag and left the estate without warning. He must be coming right back, or he would have taken his large trunk and spoken to me. There is another young man who helps me with my work–a lad called Matthew Brown–and if Budge needs to be away for a prolonged period I would have contacted him."

"Maybe he left the estate because he knew he had been the opposite of cautious, and so he fled from the law at the first sign of Jack Crawford's arrival," Lady Dolarhyde said.

"But he didn't arrive at the estate until today, and Budge left yesterday," Hannibal said.

"I have been in town for several days. It's conceivable that he might have heard of my arrival," Jack said.

It was somewhat worrying that Jack had been in town for several days before renewing his acquaintance with Hannibal. Hannibal wondered if he was starting to suspect Hannibal. He could certainly have come to the estate to "visit", ostensibly, but in reality to investigate Hannibal. Well, they seemed to have landed on Budge as the likely suspect. Lady Dolarhyde was pushing this line of suspicion because she was sure her husband couldn't be the killer, and Will was pushing it because wanted to have not killed an innocent man, and because he knew Budge could be coolly lethal.

"You're welcome to look at his room to see if there's any evidence of where he went," Hannibal said.

Under Hannibal's supervision, they searched Budge's room. Of course, it was impeccably neat, with nothing suspicious. Will glanced at Hannibal as though he wondered if Hannibal had purged it of suspicious material, and Hannibal tried to convey that, no, this was how Budge had left it, save for the small bag Will had encouraged Hannibal to pack and hide away. Hannibal wasn't entirely certain if Will understood his wordless look–but he was the one person in the world who might.

"We should talk to your other guest," Jack said.

Hannibal and Lady Dolarhyde acquiesced, and as a unit the party went to the servants quarters. This was very unusual for guests of a great house, and Hannibal was pleased that his guests would be able to see that he housed his servants in a satisfying manner–not luxuriously, by any stretch, but not with the stoic disregard of some.

When they got to the room, the Great Red Dragon was gone.

Hannibal was flummoxed. He had primed the man to come after he and Will, certainly, but he had not loosened the bindings. He glanced at Lady Dolarhyde. She had been to the room where her Francis had been held, and she was certainly capable of finding her way back there in secret. Her expression betrayed nothing, but her fretting seemed to indicate that she was worried for his health and safety–that she thought he would be vulnerable if Budge was still around.

They examined the leather straps, and concluded that someone must have let Francis go. Jack immediately asked Lady Dolarhyde if she or any servants she'd arrived with would have done such a thing, and her denial was vehement.

Hannibal knew that his servants were all terrified of the Dragon, so never would have done such a thing. Well, all but Abigail. And he had talked to her about him that very afternoon, which in retrospect seemed unwise.

Once a search party and patrols in the village had been arranged, Hannibal managed to find a moment alone to go upstairs and ask Abigail why she'd done it.

"I wanted to see what would happen," she said quietly. She braced as if expecting a blow, but Hannibal didn't hit her.

"You've made things more complicated for me," Hannibal said.

Abigail started to shake. “I’m sorry.”

Hannibal examined her critically. It seemed she truly believed he would kill her over this. It would be a waste of a death, for one thing, and for another, in a way her actions served his purposes. It had allowed the Great Red Dragon to stay out of Jack’s clutches and on the game board, but it had substantially moved up the timeline–and perhaps it had left Will vulnerable.

“I have to go,” Hannibal said. Let her stew in her worry. Possibly, she might seek out protection from Jack Crawford or someone else in the house and cause further problems, but Hannibal was willing to take the risk. He could handle the problem right now, but he might need her to help him convince Will to stay with him at some future point. Her influence on Will was undeniable, if somewhat irritating, and so he had to hope she would just sit tight.

Hannibal went downstairs, hoping that Will might have stayed to speak to him rather than going back to his cottage, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Hannibal contemplated bringing along a weapon in case the Dragon was there–but he left it to chance. He had faith in himself and in Will. No need to arm himself. He only hoped he wasn’t too late.

Fighting alongside Will sounded like perfection.

# Chapter 16

Will tidied up his cottage restlessly. It seemed like tragedy followed him wherever he went. Was it possible that Freddie Lounds was right about him?

When he thought about the fact that Garret Jacob Hobbs, Sir Dolarhyde, and Hannibal had all lived happy, comfortable lives before he got involved–with no sign of anything wrong with them or tragedy striking near them–it started to look like Will was the problem.

He was shocked during dinner when neither Hannibal nor Jack mentioned it. Perhaps Jack didn't know his history with Hobbs–but after speaking with him, it appeared there was little about murders in the British Isles that Jack didn't know. Will wasn't clear exactly what his job was or who he was working for, but he seemed quite good at it.

And he had been quick to grasp that Will's talents could be used to find a killer. This was not Will's favorite way to use his 'gift', but he'd done it before. It had left him feeling uncomfortably like the culprit in the crime. The fact that he'd been seeing Hobbs and now Abigail showed that it wasn't good for him. He couldn't imagine what he'd see when he went to sleep.

All those bodies. He'd like to believe the person who had killed them was Tobias Budge, but a part of him was almost certain it was Sir Dolarhyde. There was a quality of violence that lacked the restraint that Budge had displayed when they fought, and plus, while Budge had seemed strong enough, moving all those bodies from place to place seemed to be something only someone who was very big, strong, and physically intimidating could comfortably accomplish. Indeed, when he closed his eyes and dreamed what had happened to them, he practically saw Sir Dolarhyde doing it.

When he heard the knock on his door, he was sure at first it was Dolarhyde himself. But it was Hannibal.

"What are you doing here?" Will asked.

"I was frightened that perhaps Sir Dolarhyde would come here. He went after villagers who lived on the outskirts of town, and this is a lonely cottage. Why don't you come back to the main house, just for tonight? I'm happy for you to bring your dogs."

Will frowned. "Come in," he said.

Hannibal came in.

Will sighed. "Maybe it's better if Sir Dolarhyde comes for me here. I wouldn't want anyone in your household to be hurt. Maybe I could even handle him, after what happened with Budge."

"Will, I want you safe."

“Maybe there’s no way for me to be safe. Maybe I’m causing all this. Hobbs, Dolarhyde and Budge? What’s the common denominator here? It’s me! I’m the problem,” Will said.

Hannibal put his hands on Will’s shoulders. “Now, darling, that’s nonsense. Just because you’re able to perceive a danger that other people are blind to doesn’t make you the problem. Besides, you didn’t think there was anything wrong with Francis until today.”

“Maybe I’m the reason there’s something wrong with him. Maybe I brought it out in him,” Will whispered.

“I’m the more likely culprit, considering I was giving him therapy,” Hannibal said. “Or perhaps Tobias Budge.”

Will rolled his eyes. How like Hannibal to try to put the blame on himself or anyone else, so long as it absolved Will. He seemed incapable of blaming Will for anything.

“Besides,” Hannibal continued. “It was probably Budge who committed those murders, not Sir Dolarhyde. I’m only sorry we didn’t confess what happened when he ambushed you in your home. We needn’t be on high alert right now if he was the real killer and you’ve already dispatched him.”

Will shook his head. “No. I can’t explain in terms of–well, it’s difficult to explain, but I’m almost certain Sir Dolarhyde is the killer. I didn’t say it back at the main house, because I wanted it to be true that the problem was solved and I’d already killed the murderer, but I was only fooling myself. It was Dolarhyde. It was very apparent from the evidence.”

Hannibal accepted this. “He is suffering from delusions. He believes he is a dragon.”

“A dragon,” Will said. “And he wants to hurt people?”

“I wasn’t aware that he was dangerous, but if you think he is, I’m sure you’re likely correct. He made a sound of rage like I’ve never heard the other day. He claimed to be a dragon. I thought it was a relatively harmless conviction, but it’s possible he’s not only taking on the character of a predator, but also the behaviors of a beast.”

Will shuddered. “That fits the crime scene.”

“Tell me about the scene, darling,” Hannibal said.

“You’ll see it tomorrow if Jack manages to convince you to draw it. He took them out of their homes alive somehow. I suspect that he took the youngest child first, and then threatened her to make the parents and the other children go with him without argument. Then, he took them to the abandoned mill. He put each family in one of the rooms and killed them one by one, starting with the father. He broke a mirror at each crime scene and placed pieces of the mirror on the dead family’s eyes.”

“Why would he do that?”

“He could see himself through their eyes in the mirror. See himself changed by what he’d done to them; see himself reflected there, magnificent and terrible like an awesome god.”

“I suppose then, if he appears here at this cottage, we should be quite willing to take lethal action to subdue him.”

Will considered this. He never wanted to kill anyone ever again–it had made him feel things he never wanted to feel. Horrible, and yet somehow complete in a way he’d never truly felt before. But if Dolarhyde had been the person who killed all those people, he should be prepared to defend his life. “You should go back to the house. He needs to be stopped, and if he comes here, I’ll do my damndest to stop him. But you mustn’t put yourself at risk.”

“Normally I would say that I was confident that you could handle whatever anyone could throw at you, my dearest. But right now you are recovering from an illness. And Francis is a very large man, who is capable of great violence when he’s in a rage. You didn’t see him the other day, Will. If I hadn’t drugged him I never would have been able to subdue him myself. So therefore I applaud your desire to stop Francis if he comes to you here in the cottage–but I refuse to allow you to face him alone.”

Will didn’t want to think about how the voices had quieted after he killed Tobias Budge. He hadn’t even seen Abigail. If he told Hannibal, what would he think?

Hannibal’s hand moved down from Will’s shoulder to his forearm. “Let me get us some wine.”

Will almost said he didn’t have any wine, but then he remembered that Hannibal had brought over several bottles and stored them in a cupboard. He moved his head from side to side, trying to relax his tense muscles. Maybe a glass of wine would do him some good.

Hannibal brought him over a glass of red, and they both moved over to the parlor to drink it, though neither of them sat down.

“It’s good,” Will murmured. “Just what I needed.”

“Tell me my dear, did you like helping uncle Jack?”

Will shrugged. “I suppose I found it satisfying because it was necessary. But it makes me uncomfortable.”

“Why is that?”

Will gave Hannibal a look. “I have to put myself in the place of the murderer. Feel what they feel. Kill. It doesn’t feel good.”

“Doesn’t it?”

Will is momentarily flummoxed; he doesn’t know what to say. “What do you mean?”

“I mean many men would like to try on other people’s skin. You get to do horrible, terrible things that only the worst among us get to do. Like an actor on a stage. You know some actors love playing a villain? But you feel what the murderer feels–see what he sees. And all without having to feel guilty about sinning or meeting the hangman.”

“You think of it as a sniff of forbidden fruit?” Will asked. “You forget, I already took a bite of that apple.”

“Or two. If you include Garret Jacob Hobbs. I’m not sure if you do, but Freddie Lounds certainly does. Tell me, did you feel differently about imagining yourself committing murders after you’d killed someone yourself?”

Will’s heart beats faster. Maybe Hannibal blames him for all the madness around them after all. But he’s still looking at Will like he adores him.

A thunderous noise shook Will out of his uncomfortable thoughts, the window shattered, and Hannibal fell to the floor, clutching his stomach. Will wanted to go to him, but the Dragon was already upon him.

And he was a Dragon, now. When Will looked at him, he didn’t see the mild-mannered and kind Sir Francis Dolarhyde. He saw a Dragon, awesome and terrible.

The knife in the Dragon’s hand was small but seemed as big as a sword when it plunged into Will’s cheek–and then he was in the air, lifted by the hilt of the knife, and then thrown through the broken window onto the courtyard. Will pulled the knife out of his cheek; the pain was immense and electrifying. Then he reached behind him and stabbed the dragon in his thigh. Unfortunately that seemed to have little effect on Dolarhyde except giving him back the knife. He reached around Will and stabbed him in the upper chest. This pain was almost paralyzing. He felt tendrils of sensation spiraling out from the wound down his arm to his hand. There was already blood trailing down his cheek. Could he fight on, injured as he was?

Will lay on the ground and watched as the dragon walked away from him towards Hannibal, who had crawled out of the cottage into the courtyard–maybe in search of a weapon? The dragon picked Hannibal up by his neck, and Will, seeing clearly that he intended to snap Hannibal’s neck, fought to stand. He pulled the knife out of his chest–the gushing of blood from the wound seemed cleansing, somehow–stood, and stabbed the Dragon in the back, aiming for his kidney.

The Dragon turned and punched Will, then turned back to Hannibal, kicking him several times.

But Hannibal, on the ground, must have found what he had been reaching for–the hatchet. He swiped the hatchet at the Dragon’s leg, creating a spray of blood, and Will saw his chance. He’d held on to the knife when he’d stabbed the Dragon in his kidney, and he ran at the Dragon and stabbed him again. Hannibal attacked in a coordinated action like he and Will were members of the same pack. Wolves, taking down a rival–or killing a particularly vicious prey species for dinner.

Will had an errant thought about where his dogs were, but he put it out of his mind. He looked at Hannibal, and Hannibal looked at him. This moment of quiet and prolonged eye contact seemed to settle something between them. It was like suddenly they knew what each other was thinking–or at any rate, after that, they acted as one.

Hannibal jumped on Dolarhyde's back, and, as Will used the knife to disembowel him, Hannibal ripped out his throat with his teeth.

Will staggered towards Hannibal, but he couldn't embrace him as he would like because help had arrived, in the form of several men with lanterns–including Jack.

"We heard a gunshot," Jack said.

Will nodded, and Jack made as though to staunch the blood flowing out of various parts of Will's body, but then stepped back.

"Call a doctor. Get some sheets or something from inside," he said.

"Take care of Will first," Hannibal rasped.

Will looked at him in disbelief. Suddenly all the times Hannibal had said that he was different than Will thought, all the times that he'd seemed to admire Will for a violent impulse, and all the times Will had found himself excusing those things came back to him.

Hannibal wasn't who he had thought.

Will opened his mouth to say something, but then everything went black.

# Chapter 17

Jack approached the sick bed with the confidence of a man who knew his way around one. Hannibal had told Will that Jack's wife had died recently of a long illness. Will was convalescing in a guest room at the main house that was a ways down the hall from Hannibal's.

"How are you feeling, Will?"

Will paused to consider his answer. Physically, he was doing well. His wounds itched, but they were healing without infection according to the doctor. His mind was rather less well; he felt as though his brain was festering with doubts. But it would be short-sighted to tell Jack any of that. "Better," he said, trying to infuse some of Jack's own heartiness into the comment. "Are Hannibal and I in trouble for what happened to Sir Dolarhyde?"

Jack sighed, pulled a chair up to the side of the bed, and sat down. "It's clear to me and any other observer that you were both fighting for your life. If you had been at the cottage alone, I doubt you would have made it."

Will nodded. He knew that, at least, was true. "Do I have to testify?"

"There will be an inquest, but it looks like they'll accept my testimony. I found some papers that support the idea that Sir Francis Dolarhyde was delusional. Get this, he thought he was the Great Red Dragon from Blake's poem."

"Did he write about it?"

"He and Hannibal. I think the magistrate will accept the therapy notes as Hannibal's testimony. If only we had Tobias Budge's notes…but I don't think made any, or he took them with him when he left, and we can't find him anywhere."

"Why can't Hannibal testify?"

"He's not well enough to testify at the moment, and no one wants to wait for him to recover. The goal of the inquest is to put all of this to bed as quickly as possible. What a black eye for the county."

"Well, if I don't have to testify, what's that?" Will asked, and gestured towards a file folder in Jack's hands.

Jack looked down at it somewhat furtively. "I know you're still convalescing. I hoped you could look at something and tell me what you think. It's a case that I've been having trouble making any headway with."

Will held out his hand, and Jack handed it over. For a half an hour, Will looked through the files. If he hadn't fought with Hannibal, he wasn't sure he would have immediately thought Hannibal was the culprit in the crimes.

He had almost forgotten Jack was in the room when he spoke. “You should ask the doctor to move you to a hospital.”

“What? Why?” Will asked.

“You know why. I saw your face when you were reading that. You know as well as I do that Hannibal is the one responsible for those crimes.”

“You must be joking,” Will said.

“Look, I know you two share some kind of deep connection. I won’t call it love, but I know that you’ve found something in each other that…I found it once, and I’m not sure I could give it up. But you need to be away from him.”

“Can you actually prove he did any of this?”

Jack laughed bitterly. “I can’t even prove he was in any of the places where the crimes took place. A man that obsessed with clothes who doesn’t travel with a valet? It’s unheard of. And he cooks his own meals, so sometimes he goes to London and doesn’t officially open up the house or notify any servants–or that’s my best guess. None of his servants can remember where he is or was at any given time. They’re either all loyal to the point of criminality or borderline amnesiacs. I suppose, knowing Hannibal, he might have hypnotized them to say what he wants them to say. But Will, he’s dangerous. You should get away from him. If he decides you’re not the man he thought you were, you could end up a body in this file.”

“Are you going to go after him?”

“Are you offering to help?”

Will considered for a moment, and then spoke: “I’m not sure. I’m not sure I even believe you that he’s the one in the file. I understand why you think it might be him–but he’s so refined. So intelligent. It just seems like madness to suggest he would spend his time doing things like this. And speaking of time–he has so many hobbies and occupations. Where would he find the time to do this?”

“Believe me I’ve grappled with the same issues. And I’ve searched this house from top to bottom, hoping to find something to corroborate my suspicions. But I’ve found nothing.”

“Maybe there’s nothing to find,” Will said.

Jack sighed. “Maybe. But if you stay on, you have to know the risk you’re taking. And if you find something that proves he’s the man–the beast–that I think he is, then you have to tell me. If you don’t, then you’re as bad as he is.”

Maybe I am, Will thought silently. Maybe I wasn’t always, but maybe I’ve become just like him. Maybe that was his goal all along.

Will waited for Hannibal to get better and come see him, but it never happened. He was very sick. Will could have gone and held Hannibal’s hand at his sick bed–and part of him wanted to, because he was desperately worried about Hannibal–but he held himself back.

He was worried about Hannibal, but he was also worried that if he saw Hannibal he'd know for sure that Hannibal was everything Jack said. He very much suspected this was the case, but he had no proof. He could dismiss a feeling, especially since he'd been of a disordered mind lately. But if he had proof, he'd have to acknowledge what Hannibal really was. Maybe even what Will himself really was.

He would have got out of bed and investigated some more, but, because of the medical needs of the household, Hannibal's other assistant had come to help out. Matthew Brown was a strange one. He always seemed to want to talk to Will–exchange confidences. He seemed to be way more invested in Will than he should have been, and Will found it hard to slip his supervision.

"I just need to have a little walk. I've recovered well enough for that," Will insisted.

"You're welcome to go for a walk, Mr. Graham," Brown said, lisping slightly. "I'm just going to come with you, is all."

Will sighed. He didn't really want to go for a walk that much. He wanted to be able to investigate certain things about Hannibal and the estate that, now that he had some insight into who Hannibal really was, needed to be confirmed.

"Now you don't want to go for a walk that much anymore, huh, Mr. Graham?" Brown asked, his voice dripping in professional condensation.

"No, it's not that," Will said.

"What is it that you want to get up to on your own Mr. Graham? What is it that you want to do that I can be there for?"

Will, through almost superhuman effort, was able to stop himself from rolling his eyes. "Do you think you can help me out into the garden? I just want some fresh air. Maybe you're right that a walk is too much, but you can leave me out in the shade for half an hour, can't you?"

"I surely can, Mr. Graham, but you have to promise me you won't wander off," he said.

"No, that dream is over," Will mumbled.

"What's that, Mr. Graham?"

"I promise," Will amended.

He went and sat in the garden. This pattern was followed many times, and Will was never sure why Matthew Brown was so dedicated to his care, until one day when he confessed that he was interested in becoming Will's companion.

"You know, small birds flock together Mr. Graham," he said. Curiously, his lisp and his exaggerated mannerisms had gone.

"They do," Will said.

“When they flock together, they’re able to protect themselves from bigger birds. What would it be like if hawks flocked together?”

“Hawks are solitary creatures,” Will whispered.

“They don’t have to be. I’m a hawk, Mr. Graham, just like you. If we joined forces, we could be the most powerful birds on the wire.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Matthew,” Will said.

“Everyone knows that you killed Sir Francis Dolarhyde. But what they don’t know, and only I know, is that you killed Tobias Budge, too. And some of Count Lecter’s other unlucky houseguests.”

“Other houseguests? The only other people to stay here, at least when I was here, was Reba and Jack Crawford.”

“Not in the big house, Mr. Graham. In the cottages. You think you’re the only one Count Lecter let stay in one of his cottages? You’re not special in that way. The way you’re special is that you’ve managed to survive the experience. I think that’s because you killed the others.”

“Wait, what? How do you know there were people at the cottages, and that they died?”

“Because I’m the one who arranges for them to stay here. Count Lecter has been kind enough to offer a retreat to people who were…at a crossroads, in their life. And up until you stayed here, they always sent me a letter when they wanted to go home. But guess what? When you came here, none of them went home.”

Will frowned. Those must have been the bodies that Will saw in the woods–the ones that Hannibal had convinced him were hallucinations. But why? Why would Hannibal kill people and make Will think he was seeing dead bodies?

Looking back, he had to acknowledge the fact that Hannibal had been nurturing the darkness in Will. He had been tending it like a gardener tends a beloved crop. So did Hannibal love Will, or did he love some potential he saw in him?

It didn’t really matter, Will realized, because whatever test Hannibal had been putting him through, he must have passed. The way Hannibal had looked at him after they’d killed the Dragon together–he’d become whatever Hannibal had desired him to be.

He was the thing, the monster, realized.

“Why aren’t you telling Jack Crawford all of this?” Will asked.

Matthew laughed. “Jack Crawford? Like I said. You and I are the same, Mr. Graham. I could learn from you. I’d like to know more about how you took care of those other guests. Maybe I could arrange for some more guests to come, and you and I could take care of them together.”

“I’m not who you think I am, Matthew,” Will said.

“Sure,” Matthew said. He smiled. “But will you think about it? I know that when Count Hannibal gets better, you’re going to have a lot of explaining to do. But we can have a lot of fun until that happens.”

“I’ll think about it,” Will said.

And he did think about it. He wasn’t sure what to do about Hannibal, but it was clear that he had an ally in Matthew Brown, for what that was worth. He wasn’t sure if the young man was all talk–and if he wasn’t, Will didn’t really want an acolyte. Will, more than anything, was mystified about how Matthew Brown had become convinced he was a habitual murderer when Hannibal Lecter was right there.

But then Hannibal had the mask of his class. His impeccable clothing. His respectability. The fact that he was foreign with strange foreign ways to excuse any uneasy feelings he might inspire. His handsome face. Those wonderful manners. Even the cooking.

What was that about? The cooking. What did he get out of it? What was the point? It wasn’t about feeding people, that’s for sure. Everything Hannibal did was about power, and asserting his power over other people.

Will knew it would take time for him to figure it all out. He knew, too, that he couldn’t just leave the estate without knowing. He felt he needed to know everything about Hannibal. He wasn’t sure he still loved him. After all, the Hannibal he had fallen in love with barely even existed.

But the feelings he was developing for the real Hannibal were…unsettling. Obsession was… not a strong enough word.

Maybe a word strong enough for what he felt didn’t exist.

But whatever he felt for Hannibal, now, for the first time, it held a healthy dose of hatred.

# Chapter 18

Finally, Will managed to get rid of Matthew. He agreed to kill someone with him, if only he'd go off and find him and leave Will alone. When Matthew came back, Will would have to find a way to deal with him, but that was a problem for another time. Matthew worked at a convalescent home, and often when the inmates were released into the world they had no idea where to go. Hannibal had been "kind" enough to take them. He must have experimented on them–practicing hypnotism or whatever–and, lately, he'd been killing them.

Will wasn't sure why. He knew those corpses he had found, staged in the cottages in the woods, were likely the patients, but what was the point of it all? Was it simply to try to affect Will's mind, or was there something else? Had Hannibal become bored with his situation? Will wasn't sure.

The positive side about Will being monitored so carefully was that he was fully recovered now. The wounds on his body were still itchy and occasionally tight, but they'd healed over, and he had recovered nearly his entire range of movement. His face wound was still fairly obvious, but it had healed evenly, and didn't pull his features even slightly. Will was extremely impressed with the country doctor's efforts, but when he had said so, the man had shrugged off his thanks. "Count Lecter did all the surgical work."

This was the first time Will heard about Count Lecter being able to perform surgery, but apparently he had trained as a surgeon at one time, then quit when he found the occupation too barbaric. He had told the doctor that surgery was in its infancy, and Hannibal had no interest in butchering men and women.

The irony of such a stance threatened to floor Will, but he tried to keep his face impassive.

"But he's still in his sick bed now. He had a gun shot in his belly. How was he able to do it?" Will asked.

"Sheer will. Your Count Lecter is an extremely dedicated friend," the surgeon said.

Will nodded, but he wondered if that was really it. Maybe Hannibal, having done so much to create Will, didn't want to chance another practitioner having any effect on him. After all, Will was a monster, and Hannibal essentially, the Dr. Frankenstein who had created him for his own amusement.

His first stop when he looked for how Hannibal had experimented on him was, of course, his notes on Will's treatment. What he found was some gorgeously written calligraphy which showed exactly what he was doing in language vague enough to seem completely innocuous. He had given him various tinctures and treatments, and written of Will's nervous affliction, but none of it implicated either of them in anything.

Next, he went to the cabins. He wasn't sure exactly where they were, but he managed to find three of them. There wasn't much to find, though he broke into each to examine the interior.

The final one was the domicile of Hannibal's relative, Chiyoh, and she came out of the cabin resentfully when Will knocked.

"What do you want with me?" she asked.

"I want answers."

"Answers? Ask your lover for answers."

"He's not well enough to talk."

"And he has you to thank for that. He should have been getting treatment for his gunshot, but he performed several surgeries on you instead. And instead of being grateful, you're roaming around his estate questioning his every move."

"Oh yes. What Hannibal Lecter needs is a lover who doesn't question him at all. That would go well, wouldn't it?" Will asked sarcastically.

"He needs someone more loyal than you," Chiyoh said.

"What about what I need? He has no regard for my sanity. My agency. My free fucking will. And I should just be blindly loyal?"

"It's not me you're angry with."

"I am angry with you! Where were you when he was bleeding out but apparently still performing surgery on me? You should have knocked him out and got him treatment," Will said, his voice breaking despite his best efforts.

Chiyoh nearly smiled. "Oh I see. I didn't realize that all this uncertainty–all this doubt–it's not real. It's just that you lost your compass. Hannibal is your true north, and you can't navigate life without him. You miss him."

"It's not right that he was able to create this amount of dependency so quickly. It's not right that I know most of what he did to me–the terrible, abusive, monstrous things that he did to me–and all I want is to hear his voice."

"He's influenced you, but it doesn't follow that you've failed to influence him."

Will grimaced. "As far as I can tell, he's killed more people since I got here than he killed before."

"He's been leaving you courting gifts. Showing off for you. Showing you who he really is. Holding out his bruised and broken heart as a gift to you. Now that you know who he is–the real him, who I'm not certain even I know completely–you will own him completely. Now, you can influence him in return."

"What can I do to him? I can't kidnap him, or drug him, or kill a bunch of people to show him I care. Killing people isn't going to make him hurt less people–it'll just mean he wins. He made me into the monster he wanted me to be."

Chiyoh leaned closer. “There are means of influence other than violence.”

Will thought for a moment she was going to kiss him, but at the last moment she moved away. She walked back into the house and opened a beautiful wooden box. She took something out of it and walked back to Will. She held a key out to him.

He took it. “What’s this?”

“When is a door not a door?” she asked.

“When it’s ajar?” he asked, dryly.

“Search the main house. You’ll find something of interest.”

Will left the cottage, not sure if she was with him or against him. But then, he wasn’t sure if she was on Hannibal’s side or not, either.

Maybe there weren't any sides.

Will searched the main house. He didn’t find any place for the key to open. Then he remembered the silly riddle Chiyoh had told. The answer must not be the traditional one–when it’s ajar–it must mean something else. So what else could it mean?

He looked at every cupboard, trap door, and wardrobe, and finally found a keyhole in a place it didn’t belong. In the attic there was a linen closet, and, if one were to throw all the linen out of the closet, one would find a small keyhole around chest height on the back wall of the closet. Will put the key in the lock and opened the door.

Inside, he found Abigail Hobbs.

“Will?” she asked, her voice shaking with fight.

Every semblance of acceptance Will had started to find for Hannibal’s actions began to crumble. Abigail had been really there. She hadn’t been an apparition, or a ghost, or even a hallucination. She’d been terrorizing Will to drive him insane at Hannibal’s request.

“Why?” he asked.

“Hannibal said…he said that you needed help. You needed to be persuaded to become the real you. I was part of your therapy.”

“You were part of me losing my grip on reality,” Will said.

“Hannibal explained one time. He had to tear you down to be able to build you up.”

“Build a brand-new me, shiny and new.”

“No–at least, that’s not what he did with me,” she said.

Will looked around. The room was rather nice–there was a bed, a side table with a lit lantern, a writing desk, a large wardrobe, and a washbasin. “How are you eating? Who is emptying your chamber pot?”

“I’m not locked in. I just wander around at night. Hannibal used to make me food, now I make it myself,” she said. She patted the bed beside where she was sitting. “Sit here for a minute. Let me tell you about how Hannibal treated me. It might help you understand what he did for you.”

“For me, or to me?”

Abigail shrugged. Will walked over and sat down beside her.

“Hannibal helped me to accept my own dark urges. To accept that I had a part in the killings my father carried out, and I might want to carry on that legacy in the future.”

“How can you just say that so calmly?”

“Because Hannibal helped me to see I can be whoever I want to be, even if that means I’m a killer like my father.”

But Hannibal wasn’t there to convince Will of anything, and in the end, that was the most unforgivable thing of all. A few days after Will found Abigail, he went to her and offered her most of his life savings to go to the continent or to America–to just get away from Hannibal. For all her talk about how Hannibal had helped her, she took the money gladly, without looking back. But, strangely enough, she wanted Will to know where she was. She wanted him to join her.

But he had one stop to make, first.

The London home of Bedelia DuMaurier was not in a stylish part of town; in fact, it was out of the way. Private. Will wondered if she was the antisocial type or if, like Hannibal, she wanted privacy to carry out her dark acts.

Will walked into the parlor to see an immaculately dressed red-haired woman with strong but beautiful features sitting primly knitting.

“So you’re the Will Graham I see in all of Hannibal’s letters,” she said.

“Hannibal’s still in contact with you?” Will wasn’t proud of the dismay in his voice.

“Hannibal and I are old friends. Our connection was never romantic the way the one between the two of you is. But Hannibal does enjoy his possessions, and he doesn’t let them go. Hannibal once told me the only way I would escape him is if he ate me,” she said. Something about the way she said it made it evident to Will that she was not being vulgar, but rather literal.

Hannibal consumed human flesh. On top of everything else, he was a cannibal.

Will had a sudden memory of all the meals Hannibal had prepared for him personally. Why would a sadist cook for other people? Forcing them to eat human flesh–forcing them to be that vile, that unclean–it was the most aggressive act he could think of. For all his refinery and politeness, Hannibal was forcing this disgusting, taboo thing on whoever he chose. Of course he ate his victims. Of course he fed them to everyone around him.

But somehow knowing this didn't stave off the jealousy that he was feeling, knowing that Bedelia had had him. Knowing that he still wrote to her.

"How do I get away from him?" Will asked desperately.

"You mean, how did I become a former mistress, rather than a mistress?" she asked.

Will nodded.

"Mr. Graham, Hannibal found me to be an above average specimen. He enjoyed my company and found my physical form pleasing. This is not the situation that you're in. He doesn't covet your body. He's not intrigued with your mind. He's both of those things, plus obsessed with you. Dangerously so. Every breath he takes is about you. Every move he makes concerns you. I'm not sure he's even aware of how obsessed he is with you."

"I don't understand. I've never understood what he sees in me that makes me matter so much to him."

"I don't really understand it either, but from what he's said in his letters, I think he respects you. He loves you. And you constantly surprise him. I don't think many people can keep up to him."

"Is he even capable of love?" Will whispered.

"Whatever form of love he's capable of, you have the best of it."

"But even the best is still so…terrible and destructive. It's agony."

"And you love it. I can tell. Being so close to him…I was terrified. It was awful–but even I was addicted. When he released me from our relationship, I've never been so relieved and so close to self-destruction in my life. But it was the best thing that ever happened to me."

"What should I do then? How do I get away?"

"Run," she whispered.

# Chapter 19

Hannibal woke up, alarmed to note he had grown a beard.

He looked around the room until his eyes fixed on a servant. “I’d like to shave, please.”

His second thought was of Will Graham. He asked the servant to send for him, and the servant said that Will had left the estate, permanently.

The sense of betrayal was like a lightning bolt through his body. He wanted to get out of bed and find his errant boy immediately. But Hannibal was alarmed to find he was quite weak. He spent the next day or two recovering his strength, and within the week, he was walking quite effectively.

This quick recovery–quick, according to the country doctor–was due entirely to the state of health he’d been in before the crisis. He really shouldn’t have operated on Will without properly closing his wounds. But it was the thought of anyone else completing those intimate procedures on his darling–having their hands inside his meat–well, perhaps Will didn’t want to be his darling anymore.

Chiyoh, who must have asked to be sent for when Hannibal was healthy again, had some illuminating information about it.

“When you fought with him, he learned as much about you as you learned about him,” she said.

“And he hates me now,” Hannibal concluded.

Chiyoh had the audacity to laugh. “He didn’t hate you over that. Perhaps when Matthew told him that the people in the cottages had been real, or he found out that Abigail was faking the haunting–or when he found out you’d been drugging him. Perhaps those were the reasons he started hating you.”

“He found out all that?” Hannibal asked. Though he was alarmed to face the consequences of his actions, he was proud of Will for finding him out.

“Yes, and I think if you hadn’t been so foolish as to be unconscious, you could have convinced him that everything you did was out of love. He’s still quite in your spell.”

This gave Hannibal hope that, perhaps, Will was only playing. That he had left an easy trail to follow. But when Hannibal made inquiries about how he’d traveled, if any young man had gone by ship anywhere with a number of dogs, and a girl (because Abigail had gone as well), but he found nothing. Hannibal couldn’t help but respect this, although the fact that Will wanted to be away from him made him feel incredibly resentful.

How could he even go an hour without missing Hannibal? Hannibal felt as though he was missing a part of his soul–how could Will have been walking around normally for weeks

without seeing him?

When Matthew returned to the estate he, strangely, seemed to feel almost as betrayed as Hannibal did at Will's absence. A small part of Hannibal wondered if Will had used his gift to manipulate the both of them. Perhaps he'd never really loved Hannibal–or even the small part of Hannibal Hannibal had allowed him to know at the time.

Matthew, for his part, would not believe Hannibal when he admitted that he didn't know where Will had gone.

"But he didn't finish the job. He didn't even get a reference for another one?" Matthew asked, his voice pained.

"He did not."

"But he. We had plans," Matthew said.

"What kind of plans?" Hannibal asked.

"You fired him, didn't you? You found out about him."

"Found out what about him?"

"That he's glorious!"

"He is. But I don't think he feels the same way about you, because he's left you, hasn't he?" Hannibal rubbed it in, but he knew that the same statement applied to him, too. It wasn't a nice feeling. All out combat with Matthew Brown helped, but it was dashed inconvenient that it happened in the house.

Bloody servants.

But Hannibal made it work. He stowed Matthew's body in a cupboard, and then asked the servants if they'd seen where he went–and claimed he'd started shouting and ran out of the house. Of course the servants had heard the whole thing. Likely they knew they hadn't seen him leave the room, as well. But Hannibal paid exceptionally well, and treated them well, and asked them to do half the work they would have to do in other households of the same size. They had not betrayed him yet.

Hannibal snuck the body out late that night. The household would look the other way but they would balk at actually witnessing horrors and finding dead bodies as they went about their duties.

When the mail came the next day he poured over the letters he'd sent to investigators both in London and in various capitals in the continent. There was no news. He sighed and wrote requesting information from offices in New York and Halifax. He couldn't truly believe that Will had gone so far to escape him, but he couldn't find him nearer by. Perhaps he had.

Hannibal sunk into a black mood that even Jack sniffing futility around the county couldn't lift. He had no interest in taunting Jack, or writing about The Great Red Dragon, although all

of his friends and even some newspapers and medical journals had written to ask him to.

Hannibal was contemplating actually writing about the Dragon to try to attract Will's attention when a servant knocked. "You have a visitor," he said.

"Is it Jack?"

"Someone called Fredrika Lounds," the servant said.

"Show her in," Hannibal said.

Freddie looked good. Her hat was ridiculous, but Hannibal was well aware that ridiculous hats were the fashion at the moment. He invited Freddie to sit down and asked the servant to bring tea.

"My, aren't we civilized," Freddie said.

"I'm curious what would bring you here without invitation."

"We are acquainted, are we not? Besides, I have a business proposition for you."

"I'm not interested in hiring you for any parties," Hannibal said dismissively.

"I believe you. That's not what I came about." The servants came in and Freddie waited for the tea to be laid out and the servants to leave the room before she proceeded. It wasn't a long pause, as Hannibal's servants were excellent. He'd trained them himself. "I heard that you were left in a lurch by a certain Will Graham. I warned you about him."

"It's hardly polite to come all this way just to say I told you so."

"That's not why I'm here. I'm here because I happen to know that Will Graham didn't just insult you by leaving without completing the job you hired him for. He absconded with Abigail–that sweet, innocent girl. And he hasn't married her."

"Married her?" Hannibal asked, alarmed. "Why on earth would he marry her?"

"You know very well that an unrelated man and a woman can't travel together without being married. She's positively ruined. No one will ever marry her now."

"How did you hear of this? Has it become common knowledge?"

"No, and that's why my news is urgent. I have received a letter from Abigail which indicates where she and Will are. I haven't the funds to go after her, but I hoped you would fund a trip for me, or hire an agent to make the trip for us."

"Why should I? I don't have any interest in Abigail Hobbs' virtue or lack thereof."

Freddie looked coy. "I thought you'd want to take action against him for what he did to you. Coming to your home, taking wages, leaving the job undone…"

“Yes, that does have a certain appeal. Alright. If you give me your information, I’ll go after Will and Abigail myself.”

“You will?” Freddie said. “Well, perhaps I should go with you.”

“Ahh, I don’t think so,” Hannibal said. “Think of your own virtue, my dear. An unmarried man and woman, traveling together…what would people think?”

Freddie looked frustrated by the reminder. “Well, perhaps I should be entitled to a finders fee for giving you this information.”

“I’ll give you some money, provided you give me the letter Abigail sent to you.”

“The letter? But why?”

“Does it matter?” Hannibal wanted to read it to see if there was any indication that Will and Abigail felt something romantic for each other. And he wanted to catch a glimpse of Will, even if it was only through the text of a teenager’s scrawl.

“You have to promise you won’t show it to anyone. I want Abigail to be able to deny she ever went away with him. I don’t want proof of her poor judgment following her around all her life.”

“I hardly make a practice of going around ruining the reputations of young girls,” Hannibal scoffed.

They negotiated a bit and finally agreed to terms, and Hannibal opened his safe and counted out the correct amount of money for her. She seemed very happy with it, and begged Hannibal to see that Abigail was returned to her care.

Hannibal said he would try; he had no idea what Freddie’s actual claim to the girl was. They had no kinship, that Hannibal knew–but it appeared Freddie’s concern for the girl was genuine, so he’d tell Abigail that Freddie was eager to be of use to her if he saw her.

The letter told Hannibal two things. Abigail had enrolled in a university in Heidelberg with money given to her by Will, but she was living in student dormitories, not with her benefactor. She didn't mention how this was possible, as a woman, but Hannibal assumed she was simply dressed as a man. He felt a stab of pride that she would do something so unconventional. His influence was apparent. Will, on the other hand, lived on the edge of town, in a rustic residence suitable for the amount of dogs he had. She wrote of him in fatherly terms, and said that she owed him everything. Freddie Lounds simply had sex on the brain and assumed that any man alone with a woman would try to seduce her.

Will was an adorable creature, and Hannibal wouldn’t put it past Abigail to try to seduce him, but Will would never take advantage of a young girl–that, he was sure of.

Hannibal felt positively giddy. Freddie Lounds, of all people, had found his dearest boy. Now all he had to do was find him and force him to love him again.

Just simply being in the same room with Will might be enough to convince him that he needed Hannibal. They were two sides of the same coin. Joined at the heart and soul. The euphoria from seeing his dear face again would send Hannibal aloft.

As Hannibal and Chiyoh set off for the continent, Hannibal considered if he really believed that was true. Hannibal's nature was implacable–unforgiving. Perhaps he'd see Will and the hurt–yes, he was hurt, cut to the core–of Will leaving him would overwhelm him. Perhaps he'd do something inadvisable. Lash out. He'd let Will know him, and the boy had left him all alone, when he was weak and injured.

If Will had really loved him, he wouldn't have left without waiting for an explanation.

"Your Will knew all you'd done to him. Or most of it. I'm not sure he put all the pieces together. But he knew you lied to him, over and over. He asked me why he should be loyal to someone who'd done nothing but lie to him."

It was true. Will was very capable of finding out the whole story. Maybe Will would try to kill him for what he'd done to him.

"Your task, then, is to keep us both from doing something we'll regret," Hannibal said. "I might feel the need to punish Will, and indeed, he might feel the need to punish me. These are both understandable impulses. But if either one of us did something irreversible, I think we'd regret it."

"I know you would."

Hannibal wasn't so sure. He'd never regretted getting revenge on anyone. But then, he'd never had anyone like Will in his life. Imagine if he could forgive Will? Imagine if Will could forgive him? Their lives had been very wonderful even with Will's half-knowledge of Hannibal. What would it be like if Will could truly love him, even knowing every dark part of his soul?

And surely, Will would feel a similar freedom, since he'd been hiding that darkness in himself for all his life.

It would be worthwhile, perhaps, learning to forgive.

# Chapter 20

Hannibal didn't talk much on the journey. He had brought some books with him–various philosophers' musings on love–and he'd been reading and noting down his own thoughts. Sometimes he had to take a break to complete one of the countless drawings of Will that he'd drawn since they met, but it frustrated him to know that his darling had battle scars and he was not certain exactly where they were.

How dare he remove himself from Hannibal's eyes; from his influence. That terrible, wonderful, willful boy.

He had almost asked Bedelia to accompany him–to shove her in Will's face when he saw him, as if to say–to prove that he didn't need him. But Chiyoh had prevented that. She didn't like Bedelia and even claimed the woman brought out the worst in Hannibal. She said if things went badly between him and Will, Bedelia would still be there to pick up the pieces. And it was true, while making Will feel what he felt would be justified, it would not further Hannibal's ultimate goal, which was still reconciliation.

Hannibal loved Will, and he would give anything, sacrifice anything, do anything he had to do to win him over. And he had a chance of succeeding. He could never win over someone like Alana Bloom; her morality and her personality were fixed, and she could not bend to adjust to the way Hannibal saw the world. Will–darling, resilient Will–could. He had seen the way Will was able to take a new shape under pressure, and become something the same, but new.

Chiyoh said that Will was, in her opinion, only able to flee because Hannibal wasn't there to stop him. That he would be able to keep him with a look, or a conversation, or a kiss. But only if the two of them didn't kill each other first.

When they got to Heidelberg, Hannibal allowed Chiyoh to determine the lay of the land before Hannibal went to see Will. He went to the hotel and unpacked their clothing in the rooms. Yes, they had servants to do it, but Hannibal knew how poorly hotel servants were usually trained. He got a recommendation for dinner, and by the time Chiyoh returned, he was well fed and sipping a nice chianti in his room with the adjoining door between their rooms open.

"I found where he's living," Chiyoh said.

"Some hovel, I'm assuming," Hannibal said.

"It doesn't look much different than the cottage on your estate," Chiyoh said. "A small dwelling on the outskirts of a large estate. I didn't see the dogs."

"Perhaps that's how he managed to get here without my sources knowing. He left his dogs behind," Hannibal said. "He must be missing them."

“Doesn’t it worry you that he might be living under the protection of some other rich man? Perhaps gaining their favor the way he gained yours?”

“I brought you here to keep me from jumping to conclusions like that. Are you trying to alienate me from Will Graham?”

“Not at all. I’m simply bringing up a thought you might have in the future so that we can talk it through before it festers.”

“Well, in that case. Will has, as a rule, been fairly good at gaining favor with the upper classes. Strange, perhaps, since he doesn’t have perfect manners or even the ability to flatter. I suppose he finds favor in those who are capable of seeing merit in those of low birth. He’s never been intimate with someone who employed him before.”

“That you know of.”

Hannibal felt a twinge of annoyance. “He hasn’t,” Hannibal insisted. “And he wouldn’t now. He was hardly able to understand that I wanted him that way. That it was possible for a man to want another man that way.”

“What do you think he’s doing for this nobleman, then?”

“Training dogs, or perhaps hunting. He’s a good fisherman.”

Hannibal, it turned out, was right. Will had been hired on to hunt and fish for the nobleman’s table. Hannibal learned this after encountering the lord at his club the next day. He learned, through subtle manipulation of the conversation, that the lord had just hired a new man for that purpose, and he showed promise in training the dogs. It was, however, not really feasible for him to spend much time with the other employees, because his German was awful.

Hannibal wondered, with so many good Germans around to employ–and with employees being so eager to get a job for such and such a relative or family friend–why the lord had decided to take a chance on a foreigner.

“It was simply a chance encounter,” the lord said, sipping his port. “Will happened to be passing by the day after my former huntsman had a terrible accident.”

“Was he killed?”

“Severely injured. I had hopes, initially, that he would be able to return to work, but it’s not looking that likely. No matter, Will is twice the huntsman he is,” the lord said.

Yes, Hannibal thought. Will is a wonderful hunter. Hannibal wondered if Will’s darkness had blossomed enough that he had been responsible for the accident that the huntsman encountered. He could easily believe that was the case, especially if the huntsman had done something Will would object to, like striking a woman or kicking a dog.

But perhaps he had simply read the Lord’s need on his face. His intuitiveness–his empathy–was surely powerful enough to get him a job. If he wanted to, he could use his empathy in

extraordinary ways, to gain wealth and power. It was lucky, perhaps, for those around them, that all he wanted was a quiet stream and a crowd of dogs.

Hannibal seethed, unable to escape the thought that what Will wanted wasn't him. Not anymore.

Chiyoh cautioned him to wait until he felt more positive about things to talk to Will, but he ached to see him, so he overrode her advice.

The plan was this: Hannibal would be there when Will got home from his duties, or his dinner, and then he could confront him. Chiyoh would be near enough to intervene if things got out of hand, but not so near she could hear what they were saying. It wasn't so much that Hannibal cared about her hearing; he was used to having servants always nearby, and she was really more like family anyway. But he sensed Will wouldn't want to be made a spectacle of.

As Hannibal waited for Will it got darker and darker. To be fair, the days were getting shorter, (Hannibal had slept his way into autumn, like a murderous Rip Van Winkle) and it was early still, but Hannibal was not pleased to be kept waiting, knowing that no official duties would have kept Will from his home after dark. Was he socializing with the servants in the main house? The lord himself? Had he gone to see Abigail?

It was unbearable not knowing. It was, Hannibal knew, ridiculous to get angry at his lover for being late to an appointment he was unaware of. Love was altogether rather lowering.

Hannibal was contemplating whether or not it would be better to kill Will and eat him than to subject himself to this madness when the front door opened.

The interior of the house was full dark, and Will's eyes had likely not adjusted yet due to the moonlight outside. He fumbled at the oil lamp, then struck a match.

Hannibal saw Will's face and at the same moment Will saw Hannibal sitting in his kitchen chair, in the match strike. Will dropped the match. It extinguished immediately.

Hannibal heard Will moving away, and then the sound of a blade being unsheathed. Hannibal put his hands up. He could smell Will as he got closer, and he stood to confront him. He could see a vague shape; the match strike had momentarily blinded him. He heard the blade sing through the air and tried to hit the arm behind it.

He hit something, and Will grunted and dropped the blade. Hannibal felt a blow strike his side, and he pushed against the solid wall of Will's body. Will crashed into something, and something shattered. Hannibal felt a body crash into him, and then he was on the floor. He struck at Will wildly, but they both looked up at a sudden illumination.

Chiyoh stood in the door. She'd put her lantern on a table and was pointing a shotgun at them. "Stop this foolishness."

"How foolish of me, to defend myself from a cannibal in my own home," Will said. His nose was bloody and his hair was longer. His scars made his face different but held the map of an epic battle. If Hannibal hadn't been so annoyed he would have been entranced. Hannibal was

discomforted by the fact that he was aware of the cannibalism. He had no idea how Will had figured that out.

“I looked over your little house the other day,” Chiyoh said. “I know the bedroom has nothing that could obviously be used as a weapon. The two of you will check each other for weapons, and then go up the stairs to the bedroom. I will lock you in until morning. If you still want to kill each other when I open the door, be my guest.”

“I think each of us is capable of killing the other with his hands,” Will said.

“If that’s how you want to spend this opportunity, then I suppose I can’t stop you,” Chiyoh said. “But I suggest that you take advantage of this chance to find happiness while you can.”

“Happiness? With him? After what he did to me?” Will asked.

“Revenge won’t make you happy. Holding onto your hatred won’t either.”

Will grudgingly stood and looked at Hannibal, who did the same. He approached and patted Hannibal down for weapons. He found a small curved blade Hannibal kept at the ready and threw it towards Chiyoh’s feet. Hannibal examined Will for weapons, but didn’t find any.

“You’ve gotten thinner,” Hannibal said softly.

“Meat has started to turn my stomach,” Will said. “I can’t think why. You’ve lost weight, too.”

“He was comatose for weeks. He nearly died performing operations on you before his wounds had been seen to,” Chiyoh said. "Remember?"

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Will said.

“Of course I should have.”

“This is much more civilized,” Chiyoh said, “Now, Will, you go upstairs first, and Hannibal will follow.”

“You’re Hannibal’s servant. You wouldn’t shoot him if he attacked me. I don’t want to turn my back on him.”

“I’ll go first,” Hannibal offered.

He walked up the stairs, and into the bedroom. Will followed. The door shut behind them, and Hannibal heard a lock slip in place from the outside, and then Chiyoh’s footsteps going back down the stairs. They were in a room that was nearly fully dark, and Will stepped over to the bedside table to light a candle. When it was lit, he looked at Hannibal.

“Why did you come here?” Will asked.

“Why did you leave?”

“How could I stay?”

“Very easily, I think. Even enemies can be concerned about each other’s health.”

“Is that what we are? Enemies?”

“I wouldn’t have thought so.”

“Only an enemy would torture me by making me think Abigail was dead because of me. That she was haunting me. That I was seeing horrific murders all over the woods. That I felt terrible because I was going mad, not because you were drugging me. Only an enemy would have fed me human flesh against my will, sent a murderous madman after me, and overturned my own sense of morality.”

“Will–”

“And worse of all; infinitely worse than any of this, only an enemy would have made me feel like I finally had someone to love and cherish. Only an enemy would have seduced me into believing I could have someone like you in my life who could make me feel things I didn’t realize I was capable of feeling, and then pulled the rug out by revealing that you weren’t even a real person the entire time.”

Hannibal crossed his arms. “By your account you’ve done nothing wrong and all the fault is mine.”

“What, pray tell, did I do that was so terrible?”

“You left! Without telling me where you were going. You hid yourself from me, after I’d let you know me. How could you have gone an hour without seeing me? I thought I would die without the nourishment of seeing your face.”

“A high crime indeed,” Will said, his voice scornful. He sighed, and continued, “Hannibal I missed you every moment since I last saw you, but I had to leave. It was self-defense. If I’d stayed with you, knowing what you’d done to me…I would have disappeared–sucked into a pretty hell of your making.”

“You can’t mean to tell me that this is the end?”

Will laughed bitterly. “I traveled five hundred miles and gave up my dogs to escape you. Isn’t that indication enough?”

Hannibal tried to face the fact that this might be the last time he saw his dear Will. He drank in his face. The new scars. The longer, slightly less curly hair. The slightly Germanic clothing. His diminished body–rail thin.

“You haven’t been eating.”

“I told you–”

“Yes, you told me something. Now tell me the truth.”

# Chapter 21

Will rolled his eyes. “Oh yes. Of course I owe you the truth. After you lied to me the entire time we’ve been acquainted, it’s only your due, I suppose.”

“I could do without the sarcasm,” Hannibal said.

“I could do without your presence! You’re not my employer anymore. I don’t have to watch what I say around you anymore.”

Hannibal spared a moment to worry that Will had actually guarded his tongue around Hannibal. On reflection, he knew it couldn’t be true. Will had always been borderline rude; if he’d been capable of showing more social graces, he would have, at least in the beginning of their friendship. “Did you kill the former groundskeeper? Is that how you secured your position here?”

“Shut up! Don’t even say such things. I’m not like you. I wouldn’t kill someone for a reason like that.”

“I know you wouldn’t. But if he was kicking a dog, or abusing his wife. Or whipping a horse too roughly…well then that would be different,” Hannibal said.

Will colored. Hannibal was charmed. It had been a bit of a stab in the dark but it seemed that his darling had indeed taken Hannibal’s teachings to heart.

“Looks like he might not live. You were smart–to leave him incapacitated but not dead. It meant you didn’t have to get rid of a body. And the lord might not have hired a replacement right away if he had simply gone missing,” Hannibal said.

“Well, at any rate, I don’t need anything from you. You can go back to England. As you can see, I’m very well set up here. Everything is fine.”

“Everything is fine, except for the fact that you’re dealing with being a fledgling killer all on your own, Abigail is in a precarious situation dressing as a man in order to attend university, and neither of you can speak German. Plus you miss me, and you're likely unable to sleep at all at night without your dogs.”

“How did you know about Abby?” He swore. “She fucking wrote to fucking Freddie Lounds, didn’t she?”

“Come back to England, Will. I promise to leave you alone.”

“Oh really? You’ve done a bang up job of leaving me alone so far.”

“Well, I promise to leave Abigail alone. You can come back to England. You can continue to work with dogs. If not with my kennels, then I can recommend you to a dozen fine houses. Ones I never visit. And you can get your dogs back. What did you do with them, anyway?”

“And how long would I be free of you, if I agreed to come back?”

“As long as you like,” Hannibal said.

“What if that’s forever?”

The prospect of a life without Will stretched out in front of Hannibal. It was insupportable– and yet, perhaps promising to stay away would keep Will closer in the long run. If it got him to come back to England and leave Europe behind, it would be worth it. “I would go back to my estate and cause you no problems.”

“What’s in it for you?”

“If you ever changed your mind, you’d always know where to find me.”

“I’m never going to change my mind! Never! I hate you Hannibal. If Chiyoh hadn’t been holding a gun on me I would have killed you myself.”

“How would you have killed me?” Hannibal asked eagerly.

Will rolled his eyes. “I won’t tell you. It would only make you happy.”

“Everything you do makes me happy.”

“You don’t have to pretend to love me. I know well enough now that I was just some kind of a–an experiment. A plaything. A way to pass the time.”

“Will, if you believe nothing else I say, believe that I truly love you.”

Will shook his head and laughed. “You love that my mind is unique and suggestible, and you’re not finished playing with it. You think that because you’re beautiful and rich and and…wonderful, that I’ll just go back to you even though I know you revile me. You didn’t want me as I was. You wanted to change me into something more like you.”

“No Will. That’s simply not true. I saw how conflicted you were. How the darkness called to you. It scared and upset you, and you might never have grasped it in your hands alone. I wanted you to reach your potential. I wanted you to be confident. Happy. Victorious.”

Will shrugged and spread his hands helplessly. “It doesn’t matter. There’s no way to prove you love me in a way I’ll believe. And I won’t be with you on your word alone. You’ve lied to me too much for that. We’re at an impasse.”

“If you want me to, I’ll confess everything to Jack,” Hannibal said impulsively.

“What?”

“I know he’s begun to suspect me. I’ll go back to England and confess everything.”

“Why?”

“Because I would give up all I have–my home, my freedom, my reputation–to prove to you that I love you.”

Will gave no visible reaction. “He more than suspects you. He’s got a whole file on you.”

“He showed it to you? Did you tell him anything?”

“He watched me read it. My face told him something–I couldn’t help that–but I never told him anything.”

“Why? If you think I betrayed you so badly, why didn’t you tell him anything right then?”

Will scowled. “I only found out how false you’d played me later.”

“I’m sure after you’d found everything out Jack would have been easy to find. Why not find him?”

Will sighed. “I suppose a part of me…wanted to hear an explanation. Wanted you to tell me I was wrong. I know I wasn’t wrong, but…”

“Things would be different if I really loved you?”

“I didn’t say that. I shouldn’t matter. You loving me should be irrelevant. What does it matter, if you drugged me and fed me people and manipulated me into thinking I was seeing murder victims and ghosts that weren’t there? If you love me, you love me in a way that’s wrong. I can’t go on being treated like that.”

“I’ll learn. I’ll be better.”

“I don’t think you can. I think the way you love is in your nature. If you changed your nature to be with me, would you really be you loving me, or would you be a false set of manners? A person suit. Why would I put up with someone like you if you didn’t even give me all of you?”

Hannibal assumptions about Will, and how much he was capable of understanding and loving Hannibal readjusted themselves for the hundredth time. Every time he thought he understood how wonderful Will was, he revealed another facet of his majesty. “You still love me, even now that you know what I am. What I’ve done to you.”

Tears streamed down Will’s face, and he turned away, wiping at them furiously. “Just go. I know my feelings are weak. I know you could never respect someone like me. I should hate you and want to kill you. Well, I do want to kill you. Passionately. But I can’t bring myself to hate you. I’ve never known myself as well as I’ve known myself when I’m with you.”

Hannibal tentatively reached out and held Will’s shoulder. It felt slight. “Why have you lost so much weight? You’re not sick, are you? I’ll take you to the best doctors in Europe. I couldn’t bear to lose you now.”

Will turned abruptly, so quickly Hannibal flinched, expecting a blow. But Will threw himself against Hannibal’s chest and clung to him desperately. Hannibal held him close.

Will sobbed in earnest now. “I couldn’t eat. I couldn’t sleep. I missed you so much, Hannibal. I can’t be separated from you. I don’t care if you kill me and suck the marrow out of my bones. I’m yours.”

“And I am yours,” Hannibal said reverently. “I am your slave. You are my god. I never thought you could love me in my entirety. The parts of me that are ugly and strange. I thought–I thought I would stop killing, or become the man you knew when you first met me. I would, if you’d like me to. I could make the fiction a reality. I don’t have a compulsion to kill like Garret Jacob Hobbs or Francis Dolarhyde. I do it because I want to. They’re insignificant to me and it’s easy. I could stop for you.”

“I’ve had these visions of you. A beast. A pagan god with horns. The way you walk among us and make us all your admirers. I could not ask you to be other than what you are, because god help me, I love what you are.”

Hannibal could no longer hold back. He leaned his head down and kissed Will, who clung to him and kissed him back passionately.

“My darling. My love. Never leave me again. It was hell without you,” Hannibal said between kisses.

“Take me. Take everything from me. Leave nothing behind,” Will said.

Hannibal kissed down Will’s neck and pulled him to the bed. Will went eagerly, pulling at his clothes. He took off his shirt, and Hannibal kissed his chest, his nipples, and his stomach. “Let me worship my king,” Hannibal said.

Will opened his pants and pulled them down, and Hannibal took his cock into this mouth worshipfully. He brought Will to completion quickly, and then kissed his way up Will’s body to his mouth.

They kissed in a leisurely fashion, holding each other tightly.

“You really love me?” Will asked.

“How could I not? You’re the only person who has the empathy and intelligence to understand me. And I have such plans for the two of us. We can go all over Europe. See art, learn languages. Read each other the great masters. And the music! You’ve never heard opera until you’ve heard it in Italy. I’ve such wondrous sights to show you, my love. We’ll be deliriously happy. I’ll give you money for Abigail and you can put her somewhere safely away from me, if it makes you feel better, or we can take her with us. She can be our daughter.”

“And my dogs?”

“Chiyoh can take care of them in England, or we can take them with us. Traveling with dogs is eccentric, to be sure, but I’ve never balked at being eccentric before.”

“You’d never harm them, just to punish me? Or Abigail?”

Hannibal shrugged. “What’s the fun in hurting helpless creatures? I wouldn’t be satisfied by such a thing.”

“But you would punish me if I displeased you.”

Hannibal frowned, not sure where Will was going with his line of questioning. “I don’t know why I would.”

“I don’t know why either, but I know that if Chiyoh hadn’t been here, you would have killed me, for nothing more than leaving you. You held yourself back this time, but what happens next time? You love me, or at least covet me, and you don’t want to lose me. So you’d hurt me by hurting anyone close to me.”

“I’m not sure why you need anyone other than me. You wouldn’t have anyone to worry about if I was the only one in your life.”

Will gave a quick laugh of disbelief. “Hannibal. Can you hear yourself?”

“I know I don’t love you selflessly. I need you all to myself.”

“You’re obsessed with me.”

Hannibal looked at his feelings dispassionately. “I care about you.”

“Obsessively.”

Hannibal shrugs. “Semantics,” he said. He rubbed Will’s back. “Why don’t you try sleeping? Perhaps you’ll be able to sleep better with me here. Did you eat?”

“I ate earlier,” Will mumbled into his chest, his eyes drooping.

Hannibal sunk into a deep, contented slumber.

When he woke up, he was gasping for air, unable to take a breath, with Will’s hands around his throat.

# Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

> Oops! I didn't update for a long time and left you with an awful cliffhanger. I am thinking this will have 24 chapters and I will likely be able to finish it up by the end of April. Thank you for your patience!

Will found satisfaction in squeezing the life out of Hannibal; he did. But a part of him knew he was locked in a room and Hannibal's loyal servant or sister or whatever she was would, despite what she said last night, likely kill him if she opened the door and found him and Hannibal's corpse.

He stopped.

Hannibal gasped, sat up, and started massaging his neck. "Why did you stop?" he asked, his voice raspy from the abuse Will had subjected his neck to, but more curious than angry.

"Chiyoh," he said.

Hannibal nodded. "Good to know you still have some sense of self-preservation."

"You're one to talk. If anyone else had done that, you would have fought back. But you would have let me kill you."

"You were magnificent," Hannibal said reverently.

Will glared at him. It was clear that Hannibal truly did think he loved Will, but the Will he'd known before Hannibal started messing with him would never have done something like that. He was caustic, rude, dismissive about social norms, especially those about deference to the upper class–but he hadn't been homicidal. Hannibal had made him this and he didn't love Will so much as he was impressed with his own work. Hannibal's foresight and alienist techniques, and Will's malleable brain.

"What if I'd never killed anyone? What if I'd simply turned into a jabbering mental case?"

"Then you would not have been my equal after all," Hannibal said.

Will stared at him. It was difficult to believe that Hannibal was walking around thinking things like that all the time while seeming completely normal. Well, mostly normal. "How many others have there been?"

Hannibal shrugged languidly. "It depends on what you mean. I see potential in a lot of people. I've done my best to show people their potential. In a way, caring about their growth

as people–their potential–is a form of love. But the kind of love I share with you–no one on earth can compare with you and how I feel about you. I've never been in love before."

Will rolled his eyes. "I find that difficult to believe. You rhyme off romantic nonsense at me like you do it for a living."

"Perhaps I've seen too many operas. Come over here and kiss me, darling."

Will was tempted. But the sun was well-risen, and soon Chiyoh would come and let them out. How humiliating would it be for her to open the door and find them kissing–or more? Like their quarrel really was nothing more than a lover's spat? Like there wasn't insurmountable and irreconcilable differences to consider.

He stood up, straightened his clothes and started pacing. It was humiliating enough that he'd failed to kill Hannibal when he had the chance. It would have been worth prison, or the gallows. He would have felt pure and clean for the first time since he went to Hannibal's godforsaken estate.

Thankfully, soon after there was a rattle at the door.

Hannibal smiled at Chiyoh. "Do you mind giving us a few more hours?"

"That wasn't the deal!" Will shouted.

Chiyoh said nothing, but opened the door wide enough for Will to squeeze by.

Will went out to relieve himself and get water from the water pump, then washed up, waiting to see what Chiyoh and Hannibal would do. They seemed to be talking upstairs, and Will needed them to leave the room so he could get changed and get to his job.

His job was kind of a problem. He'd managed to talk his way into a position where there were at least two logical successors already. The way the other employees stared at him he wouldn't be surprised if one of them tried to kill him. Plus, he barely got by in German. He really should leave the position, and go back to England. The only value of his current job had been that Hannibal didn't know where he was. Of course, Freddie Lounds and Abigail had ruined that for him.

There were problems with going back to England. One, Jack Crawford. He wanted to destroy Hannibal and had already made it known he was happy to use Will to do it. As angry and frightened as Will was, he wasn't sure he wanted to be a part of that. Two, Hannibal. Will believed he would leave Will alone for a while–but who knew how long a while would be? He claimed he could let Will come to him, but he was not a man known for understanding normal boundaries–at least by people like Will who really knew him. Three, his reputation. Who knows how his reputation had suffered in his absence? Freddie Lounds claimed she cared about Abigail, so she probably wouldn't spread around that he'd been traveling with a young girl he wasn't married to (although that would do more damage to Abigail's reputation than his), but she'd feel no qualms about blaming Dolarhyde's killing spree on him. Of course she would. She'd blamed him for Garrett Jacob Hobbs' murderous actions, and most of those had taken place well before he'd arrived on the scene.

But there were advantages to going back to England. His dogs. He'd left them with Alana Bloom, and he was eager to see them again. Hannibal hadn't been wrong when he'd guessed Will hadn't slept well since he parted ways with them. And the possibility of seeing Hannibal again…even though he knew it was wrong; he wanted that. He wanted to know Hannibal was free and within reach, even if he couldn't bear the sight of him. And finally, he could do the work he loved. Despite many of his former employers violently killing people and then dying, he knew he could work with dogs and kennels and live a comfortable life in England.

He knew he had to go back. The only reason he'd fled was because he'd thought Hannibal was going to kill him. Well, Hannibal still might kill him, but at least Abigail was safe if he left her here.

As safe as someone masquerading as a man to go to university could be, he supposed. When he'd asked her how she had even thought of such a mad plan, she'd said something poignant about how she'd never thought she'd make it to age twenty and she'd live her life exactly however the hell she wanted and didn't need to ask him for permission.

He'd have to arrange to say goodbye to her–although a part of him suspected that as soon as he'd given her his life savings she'd lost all interest in him. She was a wonderful girl, but damaged and self-serving. He loved her, but he knew he could never make her feel about him the way he felt about her. He wondered if she was even capable of love.

Maybe that wasn't any of his business.

Somehow when Hannibal and Chiyoh came back down, he agreed to let Hannibal buy him a ticket back to England, as long as Hannibal promised it would be on a different boat and train than the ones he and Chiyoh were traveling on. His conditions for this were that Hannibal would never see Abigail again, and he would leave Will now and never contact him again unless Will contacted him first to give him permission.

"What about the job at the estate you left unfinished?" Hannibal asked.

"All of the workers I'd hired refused to set foot on your cursed property," Will said. "Or at least, anyone who asks me why I left the job unfinished would believe me if I used that excuse."

"I would not contradict you."

Will nodded. He was sad that he wouldn't be able to finish the job. Part of him had been very willing to do as Hannibal had requested many times and accept a permanent position tending to the dogs on his estate. He was sadder than he could articulate that the plan was never going to happen now.

"Where will you go now?"

"Hannibal, you shouldn't even be asking."

"If I don't know where you are, how shall I avoid you?" Hannibal asked reasonably.

Will rolled his eyes. “I had an offer of employment from your friend Sir Chilton. But even if you come to visit, I don’t think he’s the type to have his employees mix with his house guests.”

“I think you’re right.”

“And you? Will you stay in England?”

“Do you care?”

Will didn’t say anything. He wanted to say that Hannibal had promised that he would be in England, at his estate, and that Will would always be able to find him. But he couldn’t be so weak. Perhaps Will would never need to know if Hannibal had kept his word; perhaps he’d find a lover or a friend or a purpose outside of Hannibal and he’d put his feelings for Hannibal aside.

However, after Will had said a stilted goodbye to Abigail and resigned his position to his confused boss, Hannibal saw him off on the train.

“You were supposed to leave me alone,” Will complained.

“I promised I’d leave you alone in England. You can’t begrudge me seeing you once more, this last time, can you? You don’t hate me that much, I trust?”

Will certainly didn’t hate him that much, but he said nothing, and tried not to change his expression one iota. Hannibal, of course, just looked at him with rather too much adoration for a public place.

“So you’re coming back to England then?” Will asked.

“Even if Jack hounds me every day, I promised you I would be where you could find me.”

“I hope he puts you in prison. Or the madhouse,” Will said spitefully.

Hannibal laughed. “My beautiful bloodthirsty darling. My king.”

Will looked around furtively, but of course, they were in Germany speaking a foreign language. For all Will knew, Germany had a more relaxed attitude towards same sex relations than England did–he’d never been comfortable enough with the language or anyone who spoke it to find out. Or, more likely, Hannibal was just being reckless, as he so often was.

Regardless, no one around them was paying them any attention.

“I don’t want to see you again. I won’t chase you. I won’t do anything to get your attention, and I expect you not to do anything to attract mine.”

“It will be just as you say, my love. I will try to make my exile productive.”

Will shuddered to think what he meant by that, but assumed it was something he wouldn’t approve of. Part of him hoped he’d never know, and another part of him hoped he’d one day,

maybe years from now, be able to hear all about Hannibal's dark deeds–like a ghost story–while he and Hannibal were huddled up by the fire together.

Will swallowed. "So long," he said.

Hannibal extended his hand, and Will gave him the courtesy of a handshake. Hannibal held on too long, and Will let him. He didn't want to let go. But as much as he loved Hannibal, he couldn't just be with him. Not after everything Hannibal had done.

He pulled his hand away and picked up his luggage, and then made his way to the train. He found his compartment and sat down. When he looked out the window, he could still see Hannibal waiting for him. He nearly put a hand on the glass window, but he didn't want to appear as desperate as he felt.

For the first time since he learned the truth about Hannibal, he felt safe. Maybe he was a fool for believing that Hannibal would leave him alone, but he did believe it.

He had a reference letter from Hannibal in his pack, and a ticket that would take him all the way to his dogs and then beyond them to Sir Chilton's small but ornate estate. The project would be much more modest than the one that Hannibal had hired him for; but then, perhaps he would be able to complete this one–hopefully without any bloodshed or violence.

If Chilton went mad and killed someone Jack would probably switch his suspicion from Hannibal to Will–and at this point Will would hardly blame him.

With the conviction that he was safe at last, Will allowed himself to be lulled into a dreamless sleep by the gentle motions of the train.

# Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will worked for Sir Chilton for about six months. Chilton was an insufferable bore who tried to get Will alone nearly every day to study his unique brain–but Will's imagination allowed him to dream up a new, creative death for him every time. Not that he actually carried out any of these deviant dreams–but it was a comfort.

It was a comfort, but inside, a part of him–a part that daily grew stronger–longed for the freedom to do what he liked and be exactly who he was, inside of his head and to the entire world.

He was "normal" now, sure, but he'd never known himself the way he'd known himself when he was with Hannibal. He'd never been so reckless, so free. His actions had never been so pure–as though his body was directly connected to his subconscious with no pesky conscious mind or even peskier conscience to get in the way.

The next assignment was less obnoxious than working for Chilton, but there was something in him that missed Sir Chilton. After several weeks, Will realized that what he missed was the fact that sometimes Chilton would snidely mention what Hannibal was up to. He'd thought Hannibal and Will had had an innocent kind of falling out–or that Hannibal had fired him and then somehow been persuaded to still provide a reference. So he'd poke at Will by mentioning little tidbits of gossip or news about Hannibal to try to provoke a response.

Will missed it desperately for the first two months in his new situation, and then, he started to forget.

He started to forget how he felt when Hannibal looked deeply into his eyes.

He started to forget how it felt to authentically feel something.

He started to forget what it was like to feel alive.

The project was a big one, and the Lord was an avid hunter. Thankfully his target of choice was birds, nothing weirder, and he had little interest in speaking to the hired help.

Will played with his dogs, he worked on kennels, and he forgot.

He met a perky maid called Molly, and her friendly chatter made it seem like he might be able to have a future after all. But right when he was considering asking her if she was interested in being his wife, and asking the Lord of the manor for a permanent position and a cottage suitable for a married couple, a letter arrived.

*Mr. Graham,*

*I hope this letter finds you well. I hear good things about you. I asked Sir Chilton how things went at your last position, and he said that you were fascinating and harmless. I did wonder if the tragedies that befell your past employers would continue to follow you, but I was comforted to hear that you've led a peaceful existence since last we met.*

*Hannibal Lecter could, since you saw him last, claim the same. He has not stirred from his estate, nor have there been any tales of horror from that quarter. Therefore, I have moved on from investigating him. My new investigation centers on a man of consequence called Mason Verger. His victims are usually children, Will. I can't abide by letting him remain free. I have an informant, but not one willing to go on the record. Your special talents could move the investigation forward and do a lot of good.*

*I have a plan, Will. But I need your cooperation to make it happen. If you agree to help me rid the world of this scourge, meet me at the Oak Tankard Inn in Shropshire a week from now. We can make plans for how to bring Mr. Verger to justice, god willing, or destroy him for good.*

*Sincerely,*

*Jack Crawford*

It should have been easy to ignore the letter, but it wasn't. He couldn't forget. A part of him craved the danger. Wanted an excuse to use lethal force. He didn't know this Mason Verger, but it sounded like no one would miss him if Will allowed his dark impulses loose on the man.

He showed the letter to Molly, who had actually heard rumors about Verger's house of horrors.

"You must go," Molly said.

"But Jack was wrong about Hannibal before. What if he's wrong about this Verger fellow?"

Molly placed a proprietary hand on his arm. "All the more reason to go. You can be a calming influence on Mr. Crawford. You're certainly a calming influence on me."

"I feel like I should just burn this letter."

Molly withdrew her hand. "I have no claim over what you do or don't do," she said carefully, "But I think you should do it."

A day after Jack's letter arrived, one came from Hannibal.

*Mr. Graham,*

*I know I promised never to contact you, but I've been told that Jack Crawford plans on enlisting your help against Mason Verger. Mason is a fiend, with political power and a standing army on his estate. He also has a penchant for cruelty and lawlessness when dealing with those who cross him. I caution you to leave him be. Whatever life you have built for yourself would be forfeit after dealing with him, if you survive it at all.*

*There are better ways to dip your toes back into that sort of water. You know, of course, that I would be only too happy to help you find a stream.*

*Yours,*

*Count Hannibal Lecter*

He told Molly that Hannibal's letter contained a warning, but he didn't show it to her. He wouldn't be able to explain the way Hannibal addressed him–and he didn't want any eyes but his to see it, or any hands but his and Hannibal's to have touched those words.

He didn't reply to Jack's letter, but he requested time off work to go meet him in Shropshire. And he sent the following reply to Hannibal:

*Hannibal,*

*This vicious dog you wrote about sounds like he needs to be put down. I will take your warning to heart and do what I can to protect myself while I look into it.*

*Perhaps I could persuade a certain bloodhound to be the instrument of his destruction?*

*After all, dogs fight. Perhaps they'll destroy each other.*

*Your Will*

Will posted the letter before he thought too deeply about how revealing it was–or how devoted to Hannibal he sounded. He knew Hannibal would know Jack was the bloodhound he was referring to–and that Will wanted to maneuver events so that Verger killed Jack or Jack killed Verger. Hopefully Hannibal would stay out of it.

He said a cold goodbye to Molly; he could tell she was confused by his coldness, but he knew now that he could never marry her. He hadn't asked, and he'd given no real indication he had any intention of doing so. He knew marrying her was impossible when the prospect of manipulating a situation so that people would die–or killing them himself–seemed preferable to spending another moment in her company.

Part of him thanked Jack for his timing. If he'd been married to her it would have caused her great harm eventually. He was sure of it. A part of him mourned the idea of them together, but he knew he had no right to a happily ever after.

Jack looked the same, or maybe a little more tired. They met in the private room of the pub Jack had mentioned in his letter, and Jack laid out his plan.

"You offer your services to Mason. He'll either want you or not. I don't think he will want you, because he seems to be very knowledgeable about animal behavior, and not incredibly invested in the idea of animal welfare. But while you're in the home pitching the idea, I'll sneak in and see if there's any truth to the rumors that he has children on the premises being held against their will."

“That’s a terrible plan,” Will said. “What if he doesn’t deal with my request personally? Usually I deal with a member of the staff–the Steward or the Groundskeeper. Maybe even the Groom. Plus, I’ve been told the man has a private army on his estate. What makes you think you can avoid being detected by them?”

“I have a way in. My informant has agreed to meet me at a back road on the property and lead me to where the crimes are taking place. Mason watches this person carefully, and only knowing he’s occupied with you would set her mind at ease.”

“Why on earth would Verger talk to me personally about his dogs, of all things?”

“Because I’m his alienist,” Hannibal said, sitting down at the table.

“This is a private room,” Jack said. He scowled eloquently. “How did you even know we were here?”

“Margot told me of your plans. She wasn’t confident that you could pull it off on your own–the three of you.”

Jack swore. “I may have paused my investigation of you, Lecter, but I certainly don’t trust you enough to share my plans with you.”

Will looked at Jack speakingly. “Sounds like this Margot already shared them.”

Jack sighed. “Okay, what does you being Verger’s alienist do for us?”

“I know the man. I can ask for an audience with him and bring Will along. That will guarantee his personal attention.”

Will rolled his eyes. “Hannibal, if you’re his alienist, why not just have Jack investigate the property while you’re at an appointment? Why involve me at all?”

“Because Uncle Jack doesn’t trust me,” Hannibal said.

“What do you think, Jack?” Will asked. “Could you trust Hannibal enough that he would keep Verger occupied while we went in the back?”

“I couldn’t. Margot knows when he’s got his various appointments, but that’s no guarantee he won’t leave early in a huff. He’s an erratic character. Hannibal has every reason to tell Verger that I’m investigating him so he’ll send his people after me.”

“What makes you think I won’t do the same? You’ve had your suspicions about me,” Will said.

“Because as much as I have suspicions about you, Will, I know that you don’t want anything bad to happen to any children Verger might have locked up in his outbuildings.”

“I’m very opposed to the mistreatment of children myself. Thanks for asking,” Hannibal said. Though his words might have seemed offended, his voice was utterly without expression.

“Look,” Will said. He put both hands on the table. “I know we’ve all had our differences. Hannibal and I had a falling out, and you’ve made some wild accusations against Hannibal, Jack. But from what Margot said, her brother is an awful man–and he’s got the power and money to get away with it for years to come. Maybe we don’t like each other, but we can all agree that this monster needs to be stopped.”

Hannibal looked at Will. He hid his naked adoration–or maybe it had lessened, after their estrangement–but his regard was obvious. “I wish I could persuade you to go back to your life. This is a dangerous, reckless plan. I don’t expect that all of us will survive it.”

Will wasn’t sure if his elevated heartbeat was because he was in the presence of the man he loved, so close he could touch him, or if it was the prospect of danger. He’d been living a very sedate life the past few months, and he was sick of it. So sick of it he could scream. But he couldn’t very well say that in front of Jack. “This Mason Verger has to go,” he said.

Hannibal shook his head. “I won’t let you fight this battle alone. No matter how you resent me, I consider you my dearest friend in the world, Will. I must be a part of the plan, or I’ll reveal it to Mason Verger myself.”

“What’s with the threat, Hannibal? I was almost ready to trust you,” Jack said.

Hannibal smiled slightly. “I don’t want the two of you to pretend to agree with me and then get together and plan something without me. I’m in the plan, or there is no plan.”

Jack reluctantly nodded. “Fine. You’re in. Here’s the plan.”

Chapter End Notes

My original plan was that Jack would ask for help to take down Hannibal, which would have made the story end at 24 chapters. I decided that I’d rather the three of them team up to go after Mason, which will extend the story a little. I can’t BELIEVE I am adding Mason to a story I hate that character so much. Even in the book he was so dumb. But he works here!

# Chapter 24

Hannibal and Will arrived at Mason Verger's opulent estate around eleven in the morning. Jack was supposedly nearby, ready to be let in a back gate by Margot.

"My darling, it's not too late. We could simply have the driver pull away. The result might even be the same," Hannibal said.

"You're not looking forward to killing this man?"

"I am. Are you?"

Will sighed. "I want to get this over with and get back to my old life."

"You'd be happier if you stopped lying to yourself. Is there someone special in your life?"

"You'd be happier if you forgot all about me," Will said.

"That's an impossibility, Will. You are my life," Hannibal said. Will tried not to be touched by this; and tried doubly hard not to show his own feelings on his face. He couldn't quite believe that Hannibal was sincere about anything he said about Will. His patience was obviously extraordinary, but it wasn't out of the realm of possibility that he could play a very long game. But it was hard to know if those feelings that he professed to have about Will were just an element of that game or if they were real.

The driver opened the door and Hannibal stepped out, then waited for Will to join him on the ground. A servant brought them to the door and took them inside, and then they were in a tacky but richly appointed sitting room, and asked to be seated to wait.

About five minutes later, Mason Verger walked in.

"Well, look who it is! My old pal Hannibal Lecter. And you've brought your own pal with you. To what do I owe the honor?" The blonde man's manner of speaking was as theatrical as it was obnoxious. Will instantly hated him.

"I've come to make an introduction for a dear friend of mine," Hannibal said.

"Oh, playing matchmaker, are we? Well, your friend is a pretty little thing, but my tastes run a bit younger, as you well know," Mason said, and then he brayed a laugh like a donkey. Will struggled not to wince.

"This matchmaking is professional in nature. And, because you're such a keen student in animal behavior, I thought you might be interested in speaking to Will yourself before allowing one of your staff to assess your need for him at your estate."

"Well, you got that right. I'm interested in animals. Mainly pigs. Do you raise pigs?"

Hannibal stood, and indicated that Will should do the same. “Mason Verger, this is Will Graham. He is an expert in dog training, behavior, and housing.”

Mason did not come closer or offer to shake Will’s hand, but he did wave to Hannibal and Will that they should sit back down, and took a seat opposite them in a huge armchair. “I’ve heard of you. Quite the little sensation. What’s your secret?”

“I study dog behavior, and what makes them perform better, and I try to provide an environment that will allow them to be at their best,” Will says.

Mason actually focused on Will with keen attention. “Now, tell me the truth, Will. Does it matter what breed, or is it a dog is a dog is a dog?”

“There are some breeds that have a slightly different skill set. Sometimes they have an obsession of a kind bred into them. But their behavior is all the same,” Will said.

Mason pointed at Will rudely and gave a triumphant laugh. “See! This is what I’ve observed about pigs, too. A pig is a pig is a pig. Are you a pig, Mr. Graham?”

“In what sense?” Will asked.

“Do you behave just like all the other human animals, like all the other little piggies?”

“I think everyone likes to believe they’re apart from the crowd. Maybe even above it,” Will said. He had allowed himself to empathize with Mason just a little–you had to go along with someone like him or he’d tear you limb from limb–and the experience was oily and awful.

“I know I do,” Mason said.

An attendant walked into the room and leaned down to whisper in Mason’s ear.

“Well well well,” Mason said. “It seems we’ve had an intruder. My mischievous little sister managed to sneak in an outside observer. You’re tight with Margot, Hannibal. You wouldn’t happen to be here to distract me?”

“Not at all,” Hannibal said. “It’s possible that I mentioned my intention to visit you today to her and she decided to take advantage.”

“Well, let’s all go ask her!” Mason said. “Come on, we’ll all go out to the building where she and her little friend have been captured.”

“I’d rather take my leave. I have some other appointments,” Hannibal tried to demure, but the door behind Mason opened and men with guns stood, pointing them at Hannibal and Will.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to insist,” Mason said.

Hannibal and Will were forced to walk out of the house and down to one of the outbuildings with their hands up. Mason and several guards followed behind them. Will looked over at Hannibal and got the message from the way Hannibal looked back at him that he wanted Will

to bide his time. Perhaps there would be an opportunity to escape when they got to the building.

They all went to the barn and stood on a raised platform where a couple of rough looking men, a woman, and Jack were standing. The woman and Jack had their hands tied in front of them. Below the platform, the bodies of pigs could be heard brushing up against each other, snorting and scuffling. The smell was otherworldly bad–and as someone who worked with animals, Will knew bad smells.

“Well, well, well. I see what the plan was. You wanted to, what? Plant evidence and then call the authorities?”

Will and Jack looked at each other, confused. Mason was acting like he was innocent of kidnapping children, but for whom? There was no one there to impress–unless he was afraid to kill all of them outright. Will was unimportant, but Mason’s sister’s death would be difficult to explain. Perhaps he knew that Jack was an important investigator. And certainly, regardless of any rumors that swirled around him, Hannibal was a Count.

So Mason wanted plausible deniability–or at least for his employees to all tell the same story of how a bunch of people died on Mason’s property. Will would be able to work with that.

“No, I know you all expected me not to know the lauded Mr. Graham. But I’ve heard about you. And specifically what I’ve heard about you is that you hate Mr. Lecter. Count Lecter. Whatever,” Mason continued.

Will didn’t respond. He wasn’t sure he was expected to.

“Now, I don’t know why you teamed up with the good Count just to come after little old me, but I suspect it has to do with the lies my sister has been telling Mr. Crawford. But I’m going to make things easy for you, Mr. Graham. I’m going to give you a knife, and you can use it to do whatever you want. As long as what you want to do is kill Hannibal Lecter,” Mason said.

“You want to give one of your hostages a knife?” Will asked doubtfully.

“You don’t have to kill Hannibal Lecter if you don’t want to. My pigs will do it for you. All you have to do is make him bleed. I’m sure you hate him enough to make him bleed, don’t you?”

Will nodded. He certainly did hate Hannibal Lecter enough to make him bleed. He also loved him enough to gut him, or live with him the rest of his life, although he wasn’t sure how all three things could be true at once. He looked longingly at the knife that Mason was holding out to him.

“If you decided to hurt no one, or to hurt me instead, my employees would shoot you dead. They’re very loyal,” Mason said. He held the knife out to Will.

Will took the knife and walked closer to Hannibal. It was the first time he’d been so close to Hannibal in almost a year. It felt like there was more oxygen this close to him; like he hadn’t been able to breathe deeply until now.

“They have their guns trained on you,” Hannibal said. “You should make me bleed like Verger has requested.”

Will hadn’t been around Hannibal long enough. He had the scent, but he didn’t know what Hannibal wanted him to do. Did he want Will to kill him? Bleed him? Give him the knife? He had no idea. But then he took a deep breath and let himself see the situation strategically.

“Why Hannibal?” he said. “Don’t you know about Jack Crawford investigating me? Sowing dissent between me and Hannibal? Ruining everything for us?”

“I knew he was there,” Mason said. “No one knows exactly what happened.”

“Jack’s the one who’s causing problems for all of us,” Will said. “He blackmailed Hannibal and I to come here and distract you. Your problem isn’t with either of us. I admit I don’t like Hannibal, but if you want me to kill someone, I choose Jack.”

“Alright,” Mason said, “Kill Jack Crawford.”

Will walked over to Jack and, without preamble, slashed through the ropes binding Jack’s wrists. Jack turned and punched one of the henchmen, knocking him to his knees and kicking his gun away from him. Will slashed the other’s chest and pushed him off the platform.

Will looked over at Hannibal to see that he’d somehow incapacitated the two guards who had followed them in, and he had his hand on Verger’s throat.

“I can’t let you kill him,” Jack said, picking up the gun the henchman had dropped. “Let him go.”

Hannibal looked over at Jack. “You’re surprisingly forgiving of this man’s sins.”

“It’s not our job to punish him. We’re here to save any kids on the premises and report them to the authorities.”

“Jack, put the gun down,” Will said. He was still holding the knife, and he wouldn’t let Jack hurt Hannibal.

Jack ignored him. “Let him go, Hannibal.”

Verger’s face had gone from red to slightly purple. Hannibal didn’t let him go.

Will knew what Hannibal was doing now. He had been prepared to let Will kill him a minute ago, and he was still prepared to die. Not because he wanted to die at Jack’s hand, or kill Mason Verger, but because he wanted Will to intervene.

“Jack, if you shoot Hannibal you’re dead. I’ll kill you,” Will said. “Just put the gun down. Mason Verger isn’t worth dying over.”

“Hannibal, let him go!” Jack shouted. He changed his grip on the gun slightly, and Will stabbed him through the back of the neck. His look of betrayal was something Will would never forget–bittersweet, but satisfying. He fell to the floor.

Will picked up the rifle and pointed it to the other henchmen.

“You have to kill him,” the Verger woman said. “They’re Sicilian gangsters. They’ll follow you for the rest of your life for revenge, and you just killed his brother.”

Will cocked the gun and shot the other henchman without thinking about it too hard.

He looked over at Hannibal, who shifted his hold on Mason’s neck and broke it.

“I’m not sure he’s dead,” Hannibal said to Miss Verger. “Modern medicine cannot keep him alive for long, but perhaps long enough for you to enjoy his pain.”

“Thank you,” she said. “You should get out of here.”

“What are you going to tell people?” Will asked.

“I’m going to tell people I found the children in the out building and invited Jack here to save them and confront my brother about it. He felt so ashamed he cut himself and threatened to throw himself into the pig pen. Jack and his men tried to stop him, and he killed them and then himself,” she said.

“That’s a good story,” Hannibal said. “What about the money? Who inherits?”

“Only a male heir. But you said it yourself, Mason can’t survive this.”

“I’m sorry if I left you in a worse situation than what you were in before,” Hannibal said.

Mason was gasping at his feet.

“It’s definitely better than before, even if I have to live in a poor house.”

“Come on, Will,” Hannibal said. “Let’s leave Miss Verger to manage things. She has them well in hand.”

# Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal stared at Will as they sat opposite each other and the carriage rocked them, taking them further and further away from the Verger estate. He had missed his beloved's face, and now, here he was. And Hannibal had once again fought at his side. Killed with him. It was enough to fill his memory palace with many beautiful things to look back on in the lonely years to come.

Hannibal had asked about Will–had befriended Will's new employer for just such a purpose–and knew that Will was in love with some maid. Some woman who he could build a family with. Who he could hide away in mediocrity with.

The despair of it made Hannibal wish he hadn't intervened, and that Will's body was being munched upon by Mason's prized pigs. But it wasn't too late. He could handle this Molly somehow. He had been corresponding with a certain gentleman who–

"I don't want to go back," Will said, interrupting Hannibal's thoughts.

"Go back where?"

"I don't need my things right away. We can send for them. You can arrange transportation for my dogs, can't you?"

"Transportation where?"

"Your estate. Of course I–Wait, don't you want me?"

"Darling! Of course I want you. You didn't say. I thought you were happy with your little maid and your little life."

"That wasn't happiness. I've only known happiness once, and I couldn't turn it away after knowing it again today with you."

Hannibal allowed himself to feel the full pleasure of triumph–but then, he tried to hold himself back. Perhaps he wasn't fully understanding Will. "What are your conditions?"

"Conditions?"

"Yes," Hannibal said. "Obviously you don't want me to confess to Jack since he's being digested by a hog at the moment, but I can't believe you want things to be as they were."

"I don't want you to drug me," Will said.

"Will, sometimes drugs are extremely therapeutically valuable. I couldn't in good conscience promise to never give you drugs," Hannibal said.

Will's eyes opened wider. "Never without telling me," he said, as though it was obvious.

"That makes sense, my love. I'll only ever drug you with your knowledge and permission."

"And you'll never feed me anyone without telling me," Will said.

"My love, feeding my victims to other people is something I do to show my superiority. I would never do it to you again, because I'm not superior to you at all. You're my equal. Some might say you're my superior."

"Only you would say that, Hannibal," Will said. He sighed. "You will continue to stay away from Abigail, and you'll never kill anyone or anything to punish me. If I anger you, you'll talk to me about it. Hell, I don't mind if you hit me. Just don't kill my dogs or some friend I've made."

Hannibal nodded. "That sounds fair. I suppose I should ask for the same courtesy in return."

Will gave him a strange look, but Hannibal had seen Will's fits of rage. Finally Will nodded in agreement. "Finally, you will never marry a woman, not even a cold, emotionless arrangement to make an heir. You will never have sex with anyone other than me, and you'll do everything in your power not to be caught for your terrible, murderous acts, even if you get very bored."

"You drive a hard bargain," Hannibal said. He pretended to think about it for a moment, but he could tell Will was not fooled by his pause. "I agree to your conditions. You must promise to be faithful to me as well, because I don't know what I'd do if you ever shared yourself with someone else that way. This maid, for instance…"

"We never so much as kissed. We're not engaged. It was simply…a thought experiment."

"What would have happened if you had not been dragged back into the world of violence by Jack?"

Will looked at Hannibal, a rare direct look into his eyes. "I would have dragged myself back in. That life I was trying to build away from you? It was killing me. I probably would have started dreaming I was Garrett Jacob Hobbs again and slit someone's throat."

"And it would have been very difficult to save you from a hangman's noose. I'm grateful to Jack that we didn't have to wait any longer, or face any more obstacles. I've wanted you so desperately, Will," Hannibal said.

"I've wanted you so badly," Will said. His eyes filled with tears. "I knew I couldn't just accept the way you'd treated me. But I wanted to so desperately."

"What shall we do now?" Hannibal asked.

Will smiled through his tears. "I don't know. I do want you to take me all over Europe to hear music and see art like you want to. But at first, I suppose–I suppose we should get settled in the estate. Get my dogs sorted, and yours. I need to actually finish the dog kennel that started

this all. Then I need to see your place in London. It can't possibly be as grand as I've imagined it."

"I'm sure it's grander," Hannibal said. "And my servants are extremely well-trained. Indeed, they were my first subjects when I started hypnotism, and none of them ever remember anything remotely criminal that I do. A few sessions more and they'll be completely blind to the fact that the lovely, kind Mr. Graham, who should perhaps take a position as secretary in the household, doesn't sleep in his own bed, but rather the master's."

Will's eyes sparkled. "I know I should object to something that takes the free will from others, but part of me wonders if you could plant a suggestion in one of them that they stop whatever they're doing at a certain time of the night and bring me a Scotch."

"They're extremely well-paid, my darling, and I think it's rather a kindness to erase some of their daily drudgery. Who wants to remember a work day in every and all detail? And who wants to live with a moral quandary of reporting a boss who means you in particular no harm but is rather dangerous to others?"

Will rolled his eyes. "Truly, Hannibal, your benevolence is staggering."

When Hannibal noticed they were approaching a certain crossroads, he knocked for the driver to stop the carriage and directed him to change course for his country estate. They wouldn't make it all the way that night, so Hannibal had a short conversation with the driver about what Inn to stop at.

"You're very commanding," Will said when the carriage started up again.

"You sound as though that's something you admire," Hannibal said.

"It's lovely."

"Why don't you come over here? No one likes to ride facing backward."

Will moved so that he was sitting with Hannibal facing forward, and Hannibal put an arm around his shoulders. Something settled in Hannibal and he felt calm and happy for the first time in nearly a year. "If this is a plot to kill me, darling, please, do it while I'm sleeping. As a kindness. I want to live with the dream that you want me a little longer."

Will leaned his head on Hannibal's chest. "I shouldn't be sort of happy that you're still worried about me wanting to kill you, but I admit, I enjoy it."

Hannibal rubbed his hand along Will's back. "You've been eating. Taking care of yourself. I approve. You were so thin when I found you in Germany."

Will looked up at him, looking almost unbelievably young and appealing. "I could eat again when I knew you loved me. Wanted to be healthy in case I found a way to be with you again. I was living for the opportunity to see you again."

"Poor Jack. If he'd survived us, I would have bought him an estate in thanks for how he brought us together."

Will hugged him tighter, and when he looked up again with those gorgeous blue eyes, Hannibal kissed him. Will kissed him back passionately–and in fact, only the knowledge that they would have to walk into a public Inn held Hannibal back from debauching his lover right there in the carriage.

When they'd finally stopped at the public house, had dinner, booked their room, dismissed the servants and were finally, finally alone, Hannibal looked over at Will, who stood at the washbasin with his shirt off, his chest glistening with water.

"The last time we stayed at an Inn together, I tried to seduce you," Hannibal admitted. "I tried to get you to notice my body. You didn't seem very interested."

"Even after you told me you adored me I didn't believe you really wanted me like that," Will said. "I'm not sure when I started wanting you like that, but suddenly there it was."

"And you've never made love–or had sex–with anyone but me?" Hannibal asked.

"Never," Will said.

There was something about the way Will said it that made Hannibal think he was lying, but he didn't care. If Will had had revenge sex with someone else, it would be fine, because it had led him here and Hannibal applauded everything that had happened that brought them here together.

"There's so many things we've never tried, my love," Hannibal said.

"Like what?"

"I've always wondered if you'd benefit from anal massage with a vibrator," Hannibal said.

"Benefit from?" Will asked, turning bright red.

"There's evidence that many diseases such as melancholy, hysteria and anxiety are connected to sexual frustration. The premise of this theory is that humans in a natural state need to experience a healthy sex life. And since you went for a very long time without sex, perhaps it contributed to your anxiety."

"So when we're alone together for the first time since getting back together, you're not thinking about making love to me or even building a life with me. You're thinking about the latest peer reviewed paper on anxiety," Will said doubtfully.

"I can think about two things at once, my love. And if a prostate massage happens to help you relax and feel less anxiety, then perhaps you'll be amenable to letting me make love to you as often as I like," Hannibal said.

"And how often do you like?"

"I think you'll find my sex drive is above average."

"I'm starting to think doctors are perverts," Will grumbled.

Hannibal laughed. “What we’ve done so far makes me very happy, my darling, and I don’t need to do every sex act under the sun to enjoy you.”

Will sidled up to Hannibal. “I think I'd try anything once.”

“You’re such a perfect boy. As though you were made for me. Just for me,” Hannibal said, and he kissed Will soundly.

“I’m not sure why you keep calling me a boy. I’m almost thirty. And you’re not that much older than me,” Will said.

“That means we’ve got years together. Years, to make each other happy. To bring each other joy and sorrow and pain and rage. And to destroy each other with our love.”

Will scoffed. “More of your romantic nonsense,” he said. “Shut up and kiss me.”

And Hannibal did.

Chapter End Notes

So I did some research on Victorian medical/alienist techniques (RIP my search history) and apparently Victorian doctors using vibrators on patients in their office was only ever a theory not a fact (despite the Hugh Dancy movie about him masturbating female clients as a Victorian doctor. It’s called Hysteria and it’s WILD, ya’ll)–but it doesn’t seem outside the realm of possibility that Hannibal would find such a treatment medically advisable. Especially on Will. But don’t necessarily go around thinking Victorian doctors were doing prostate massages (although dildos, which were billed as medical equipment at the time, DID, in fact, have attachments for anal stimulation--used to treat impotence??) on patients, although it seems that some of them were doing some sketchy things “down there” on women, but probably more because those particular doctors were, like Will suggests, perverts.

But, because this is a Victorian story filled with Hannibal taking advantage of the all-around weirdness/sketchiness of Victorian medicine in every conceivable way, I am going to include a final chapter where he tries out some sexual “therapies” on Will. If you’re not into it, this is the end of the story for you! If you are, the final chapter will be up soon.

# Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will loved the London house, despite it being in the city, despite it being as ostentatious as Hannibal had claimed, and despite his dogs being back home in the country in the finally completed kennel. Maybe it was because he could imagine he and Hannibal making a new start there, or because the servants who worked there hadn't known him when he was losing his mind.

Maybe it was just because he was happier than he'd ever been.

Hannibal introduced him to many things in London. There were the art galleries, which he'd never been inside when he lived in London before. The theaters which seemed so different when you went on opening night and sat in the good seats. The salons where he could discuss the latest poetry and books–all of which he'd read in his newly found leisure time.

Will introduced Hannibal to the harbor, and to his father. Hannibal was much more familiar with the seedier parts of London than Will was with the lofty ones, and he seemed to be able to fit in anywhere–although there was always something slightly off about him. Will's father appeared rather mystified by Hannibal, but was happy enough that his son had landed on his feet.

And Will, despite his misgivings, had landed on his feet. He enjoyed the life he and Hannibal had, but he still felt anxious when it came to things like getting caught killing someone or, god forbid, revealing his feelings for Hannibal to someone who might go and complain to the authorities.

He was reassured that soon enough they'd be on the continent and many European countries other than the UK either had not criminalized homosexuality or signs of affection between men were more culturally accepted and they could get away with living almost openly.

But still, Hannibal felt that his anxiety was unhealthy, and suggested Will submit once again to Hannibal's ministrations as an alienist to deal with it.

"You must be joking," Will said. "My anxiety is not unnatural. We are, in fact, actually lawbreakers, Hannibal. It's very natural to feel anxious that we'll be caught and brought to justice."

"I'm not anxious," Hannibal said.

"Well, I won't let you drug me again," Will said. "You think I'm anxious now, just imagine how anxious I would be if I wasn't thinking clearly all the time, or I was hallucinating."

"Not all drugs make you hallucinate."

“All the ones you’ve ever given me have,” Will grumbled. At times, in the right environment, Will had taken drugs recreationally with Hannibal. It had been…something. Not something he particularly enjoyed, but he’d done them just to see what it was like when he felt in control of the situation.

“We could use some other recognized treatments, like bloodletting. Perhaps some purgatives or an ice water bath.”

Will rolled his eyes. “I see where this is going. You want me to object to everything so that only the prostate massage is left over.”

“We’ll both enjoy it, darling, and it might help you relax.”

“Fine,” Will said. He knew Hannibal found their sex life satisfying, but tame. And if he let the man convince him to murder people, doing whatever he wanted in bed shouldn’t be too much of a stretch–plus, as much as Will found it a little bit shameful, he loved absolutely everything they’d ever done.

The thought of Hannibal having his fingers inside of Will shouldn’t be so frightening–after all, he’d performed surgery on Will before. He should trust him. He did trust him. But there was a small part of him that still worried about giving up all control.

“And that’s why you feel anxiety,” Hannibal concluded, when Will tried to articulate it.

“So if I let you do this thing, I’ll trust you more, I’ll relax, and all my mental problems will disappear?” Will asked doubtfully.

“It’s possible I’ve oversold it,” Hannibal said. “You’ll have to tell me if you don’t enjoy it. Some people don’t. I have an instinct that you will, but don’t suffer through it if you don’t like it.”

Somehow the fact that Hannibal gave him this out was the final thing that made him agree wholeheartedly. He disrobed and lay on the bed on his back. He allowed Hannibal to put a cushion under his buttocks, and he moved where Hannibal said.

“Now, darling, I’m going to go wash my hands and get some clove oil. It’s what the Japanese use to ease the way during sex,” Hannibal said.

“I hope you don’t know that because of Chiyoh,” Will said to Hannibal’s retreating form.

“I’ve never had relations with her,” Hannibal said as he reentered the room. “But I think I’ll save the story of who I did learn it from for another day.”

Will released a breath. Part of him was nervous, but another part of him was buzzing with anticipation. Hannibal had told him a little bit what to expect–and it wasn’t like he’d never had anything inside him at this point–and it sounded addictive. If he was honest, part of the reason he didn’t want to do this one last thing was because he didn’t want sex with Hannibal to feel more necessary than it already did. Like a need, not a desire.

When Hannibal breached his anus, Will consciously relaxed, allowing the intrusion. The sure movements of Hannibal's fingers were familiar and Will raised his head. "I thought you said you were gonna holy fuck!"

"There it is," Hannibal said, his voice smug. "How does it feel?"

"Ah," Will said, trying to describe it. "Different."

"Not bad though?"

"No. Just. I mean, I guess, keep going," he said.

Hannibal continued to stroke that same spot and Will felt warm suddenly in places he wouldn't have anticipated. Lit up, like the electricity demonstration he and Hannibal had seen the week before. The feeling washed through his body like waves–a spasm that was strange and pulsing, but pleasurable, too.

Then, Hannibal reached his other hand, also greased up with clove oil, and tugged on Will's dick.

"Oh," Will nearly shouted. "Oh fuck Hannibal. Oh my god."

The dual sensation of the finger still rubbing methodically on his prostate and the hand that had closed firmly around his cock made those electrical waves crackle like lightning. He felt like he was in that moment right before he came but instead of coming, that feeling just moved over him and through his whole body.

Hannibal took the hand away from his cock and Will whimpered in distress, knowing that Hannibal was going to redouble his efforts on his prostate, and it was going to be a glorious torture.

Will lost track of time as the spasms wracked his body, and then, finally, Will came. His body seemed to levitate off the bed and he felt something like contractions contort his movements. Will heard an inhuman sound come out of his mouth, and his cock erupted everywhere, untouched.

Hannibal said something comforting, but his fingers still managed, even through Will's contortions, to keep touching that spot.

And he just kept coming.

"No no no," Will said. "I can't. You have to stop."

"My darling," Hannibal laughed lightly. "We can do this all night."

Will sobbed his pleasure, and Hannibal kept up his massage. Eventually Will's cock stopped leaking fluid, but the waves of pleasure kept on. Will groaned and rode out the sensations–too wrung out to object any more.

It seemed to go on and on, and Hannibal kept firmly in control throughout. Finally, he pulled out his fingers.

“What do you think?” he asked. “Do you feel relaxed?”

“Ugh,” Will said.

Hannibal climbed up the bed and kissed Will soundly. “Well, that was just the first time. We’ll go again in a few minutes.”

“No,” Will whimpered. “You can’t. I might die.”

“You won’t die,” Hannibal said. “Although the French call an orgasm *la petite mort* . The little death.”

“Hannibal,” Will complained.

Hannibal sighed. “If you really want to stop, we will. But your body isn’t anywhere near its limit. You were made for this. Your body, your mind. This is good for you. I know you love it. Why won’t you let me give you what you clearly want?”

Will let out a long breath. In fact, he felt so relaxed, so wrung out–his body still vibrating with pleasure and experiencing the odd tremor of feeling from it–that he decided to just place himself in Hannibal’s hands, so to speak. “Okay,” he said, “Do what you want with me.”

Hannibal rubbed his hands together gleefully, like the villain in a trashy serial, and set to work.

His fingers went in first, and Will found it uncomfortable, at first, because it was all too much sensation, but not unbearable. This time Hannibal spent more time widening his passage, and described how it would feel when his cock was inside. Will listened more to his voice than his words, because that feeling was unbelievably–inconceivably–building again.

“Too much, Hannibal,” Will muttered, tossing his head from side to side. “It’s too much.”

“You’re just fine, love,” Hannibal said. He stopped massaging Will’s anal walls and went back to nudging at his prostate, and Will felt that wave of full body pleasure again.

“Oh god Hannibal. You’ve never done this with a patient have you? This isn’t therapy, baby. This is fucking,” Will said.

“Therapeutic fucking,” Hannibal said, “And I’ve never done it with anyone but you.”

“Hmmm,” Will said in satisfaction.

And then, Hannibal pulled out his fingers and lined up his cock.

“This is gonna be bad, Hannibal. This is going to fucking kill me,” Will said.

“You’re doing so well, my love,” Hannibal said, his voice straining slightly as he pushed in. “You’re doing marvelous.”

And then, Hannibal was inside him.

Will enjoyed the feeling of closeness and intimacy for a few moments, and then, Hannibal began to move.

The feeling was back, and it was staggering. Will lost all footing–felt the pleasure everywhere. He felt wave after wave of it, pulsating with the in and out of Hannibal’s cock in him, and then he blacked out.

When he woke up, Hannibal appeared slightly concerned about it.

“I told you I might die,” Will mumbled.

“You’re alive and well, my darling. I monitored your heart rate the entire time.”

“What would you have done if my heart went wonky?”

“Mouth to mouth, I suppose.”

“That’s kind of what got us in this situation in the first place,” Will joked.

Hannibal laughed and caressed Will’s face dotingly. “Did you enjoy it?”

“I never want to do that again. Except for maybe every day and twice on weekends.”

“I’m glad. I’ll have to record your reactions to stress in the next few days and see if there’s any positive effect.”

“How could you possibly publish about it?” Will asked.

“I couldn’t publish. But just because I can’t publish doesn’t mean I don’t want to know.”

Will threw his head back on the pillow. He supposed if he had to be in love with a mad scientist, there were worse forms of experimentation he could be subjected to. He’d already experienced worse forms of scientific mayhem from Hannibal.

Suddenly he sat straight up in bed. “Wait, what stress? What the hell are you planning in the next few days?”

Hannibal made a chiding sound. “Now Will, you’ve undone all my work. I’ll have to start again.”

Chapter End Notes

I feel like maybe I should add a "crack treated seriously" tag to this one because it got so cracky by the end? Anyway, I had an unusual amount of fun with this one, and I was actually shocked at how canon-adjacent it ended up. Anyway, thank you to those of you who read along when this story was in progress! Your encouraging words kept me motivated throughout. I am doubtful there will be a sequel and this is definitely the last chapter, but I do have several other Hannibal/Will stories if you enjoyed this and are unfamiliar with my work.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!